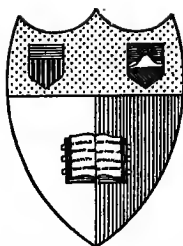


PIRATES OF THE SPRING

FORREST PEID



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## PIRATES OF THE SPRING

*BY THE SAME WRITER*

THE BRACKNELS

FOLLOWING DARKNESS

THE GENTLE LOVER

AT THE DOOR OF THE GATE

THE SPRING SONG

W. B. YEATS: A CRITICAL STUDY

A GARDEN BY THE SEA

# Pirates of the Spring

BY  
FORREST REID

" But as the boy, the pirate of the spring,  
From the green elm a living linnet takes,  
One natural verse recapture."



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TO

R. J. WRIGHT

# PIRATES OF THE SPRING

## PART I

### I

"I DON'T know why you should take anything more out of it than that Nature did not intend Beach to be a scholar," said Father O'Brien, in his slow, deliberate fashion, as he set his empty tea-cup down on the little japanned table beside him, and leaned his somewhat portly person back in the wicker-work chair, which, after the manner of its kind, creaked a sharp remonstrance in reply. But Mrs Traill did not seem to see the matter thus. She sighed, and looked extremely pretty and eager for advice, as her eyes rested on the large, rotund, benevolent countenance of her visitor. She was particularly fond of appealing for masculine advice, though she usually failed to follow it when given. But she liked to consider it, to turn it over, to be almost on the *point* of taking it, to hold it up, as it were, to the light (the light of her own already fixed intention); moreover, she had great confidence in the wisdom of Father O'Brien. His face, rosy-cheeked and blooming as that of a happy schoolboy; his manner; an air of gentle

authority he had; even the pleasant richness of his voice, which somehow seemed to add a peculiar weight to his carefully chosen words—all these things united to inspire confidence; and Mrs Traill was intensely feminine. These two, in short, were firm friends; they had been so ever since the priest, three years ago, had come up north to take charge of a Jesuit Mission that had not proved entirely successful. Mrs Traill, also, was a southerner. One recognised it at once from the softened vowels, the sweetness of her voice, her colouring that suggested a remote Spanish ancestry, no less than from a certain gracious indolence of manner. Thus, quite apart from any more ghostly relation, their friendship was established by the fact that they both felt themselves to be more or less in the position of aliens among these dour northern Protestants, whose standards—the standards of a shrewd, commercial race—were so different from theirs. Mrs Traill, it is true, had lived in the north for eighteen years (ever since her marriage, and she had married very young), but, spiritually, she had never become naturalised to this more wintry, more strenuous climate. She had made few friends, though of course she knew everybody, and she often wondered why, after her husband's death, she should have continued to live on among people who so seldom amused her. She liked the house, and Beach was at school here, and she had got rather out of touch with her own people—these, doubtless, were the reasons which, combined with a constitutional

reluctance to take any active step, and her son's firm opposition to her taking this particular step, had hitherto prevented the carrying out of a much discussed plan to give up the place and go back to Waterford. She had another plan, a plan of going abroad with Beach, of their making the grand tour together, quite in the old-fashioned style; but this was still more nebulous, and they had not as yet taken even that preliminary trial trip which the boy's numerous holidays would have made so easily practicable.

"Tell me, now, do you really want my advice?" asked Father O'Brien, with a barely perceptible twinkle in his bright, observant eyes. "If you do, I recommend you to send him right away from his present surroundings—nothing else will be of any use. Send him to school in that land of hope and glory, England."

Mrs Traill's face expressed her astonishment. "I couldn't possibly do so," she answered quickly, almost reproachfully. "You surely don't want me to be left with *nobody*!"

The priest shrugged his shoulders. "You'd have him in his holidays."

"Yes, and I'd find him quite changed every time he came back. Thank you, I'd rather keep him as the dunce he is."

Father O'Brien slowly shook his head. "You're looking at it now from your own point of view," he told her. "And, at any rate, you can't keep him for ever."

They were seated in the wide stone porch, and Mrs Traill gazed out over the tea-table at the

smooth green stretch of sunlit lawn, as if pondering his last words. But presently she said, "I have a better plan than that—or rather, it would be better if you would only allow it to be so."

These last words were spoken with a most alluring sweetness, and her eyes and her smile rested upon him ever so persuasively as she paused for his reply. But Father O'Brien—though by no means proof against the wiles of woman—had foreseen the plan from the beginning, and it did not appeal to him. Even to oblige his dear Mrs Traill he had no intention of turning pedagogue.

"I know, of course, you're very busy," she suggested softly.

"Very," he promptly agreed. "And there is the utterly insurmountable difficulty of his religion."

Mrs Traill was dissatisfied. She saw that her scheme had failed, and that Father O'Brien was going to be tiresome instead of helpful. Her manner, in spite of its gentleness, betrayed this. "You mean that people might talk, that Mr Traill's family might talk, and that the aunts in particular would be sure to. I daresay that's perfectly true, but as they talk already I can't see what difference it would make."

"It would make this difference, my dear friend:—it would give them something to talk about, a definite grievance. One must take everything into consideration."

"I don't see why. At any rate, this seems to me a purely worldly consideration."

"And you live in the world. To be unworldly, one ought at least to be consistently so. Merely to be erratic doesn't do at all. Your motive would certainly be misconstrued."

"Well, let them misconstrue," returned his companion, with an unexpected sharpness. "I don't see that it matters what they do: certainly it doesn't matter to me. If his father had trusted me it would be different. As it is, I sometimes feel almost at liberty to——"

"I'm sure he trusted you," Father O'Brien interrupted suavely. "Besides, as schoolmaster to a reluctant pupil, I might very easily lose any influence I may at present happen to possess over Beach. There is that to be thought of too."

"It was not a sign of trust to hedge everything about so that the poor boy really has no free choice at all."

The priest was silent, and presently Mrs Traill added, though not in the tone she had before used when making the suggestion: "So you won't take him?"

"No; I won't take him."

"And yet you like him! Everybody likes him . . . ." She branched off suddenly on another path. "I often wish there wasn't all this money. It makes it so much more difficult. . . . I mean, Beach could be so easily imposed upon. . . . You may jeer at me if you like, but I can't help imagining sometimes that the wrong kind of girl may get hold of him—you know what I mean—the kind of thing one sees in plays and reads of in novels—I suppose they are based on

life;—some dreadful, designing person who would make him miserable. Anyone could wheedle him into doing what they wanted. He is far too simple and generous.”

Father O'Brien's double chin rested upon his soutane: he looked straight out before him through the drowsy afternoon sunlight, but not in the least with any appearance of anxiety. “Aren't you anticipating rather unnecessarily?” he asked, with a salutary blandness.

“I daresay. But sometimes one can't help it—at any rate, *I* can't.” She paused, and then brought out by way of justification, “My youngest brother, when he was a boy of eighteen, married a woman fifteen years older than himself. He met her on the boat, going to America. She was a widow into the bargain, and with no discoverable relations.”

“That possibly was an advantage,” murmured the priest. “And you have still nearly two years to count on before Beach reaches your brother's age.”

“The marriage turned out better than might have been expected,” added Mrs Traill, pensively. “At least, there was never any actual unpleasantness, and Tom himself seemed contented enough:—though of course it looked, and was, idiotic.”

“So there you are!”

“I'm not there at all,” she returned quickly, “and I don't see how you can take it so calmly. I couldn't *bear* anything of that kind to happen to Beach. It would be perfectly dreadful; and I know, in spite of what you say, that he's

exactly the sort of boy a clever woman could twist round her little finger."

Father O'Brien met this by an amused head-shake. "I don't agree with you. He doesn't strike me as in the least likely to do anything foolish. He's much too stolid and unromantic."

"He isn't really unromantic. I had to dismiss a maid whom I caught kissing him under a piece of mistletoe last Christmas. It was that that first made me think of such things. I'm quite convinced she brought in the mistletoe on purpose."

This time the priest laughed aloud. "Did she, then? Well, it only proves that the romance was on her side. And it wasn't really very serious, was it? Of course, he's big for his age."

"Sometimes I almost wish he was ugly."

"I can't see how even that would offer much protection, if the lady is to be as mercenary as you picture her."

Mrs Traill looked at him for a moment or two in silence. "I wonder why you're so unsympathetic?" she said at last, very softly.

"I'm not, as you know very well; only Beach, I imagine, has a good deal more of his father's blood in him than you give him credit for."

But this idea, so far from proving reassuring, did not seem to please Mrs Traill at all. She let it pass, however, as one which scarcely lent itself to discussion; she even, to a certain extent, apologised for so harping on her son and his future.

"I suppose people are usually rather absurd

about their own children," she admitted, with a faint sigh. "Particularly when there is only one child, and that one a boy. If Beach had *any* sort of intellectual interest or taste, I think I should be quite content."

"I fancy you exaggerate the importance of that also," Father O'Brien replied, folding his plump, shapely hands upon his stomach. "With most boys there comes a period when the body grows more rapidly than the mind. . . . And one thing I feel quite sure of—Beach will never choose the wrong kind of company. He may not be particularly clever or thoughtful, but he has a lot of common sense, and a very strong sense of honour. On those you may build a good deal, you know,—especially in the way of character,—and without much fear of disappointment."

## II

SAVE when a fish jumped, the lake lay like a mirror of polished steel under the June sky. Oval in shape, it was surrounded by trees not too closely planted (chestnut and beech, ash and willow), while the ground was green with grass and moss, and dark, lustreless bracken. It was fed by springs, and the water at one end flowed out by some hidden subterranean passage, presently to emerge as a stream, winding through the lower woods, splashing and chattering its way down to the Lagan. At the other end the lake broadened out into reeded shallows. These were submerged in winter, but all summer, from May till October, they formed a kind of marsh, where the waterfowl built their nests. Upon the grass at the deeper end three boys now sprawled in various attitudes of laziness. They appeared to be much of an age, and were dressed in light flannel suits, with soft shirts and collars, and with gay, striped ribbons on their straw hats. The colours of these ribbons, matching the colours of their ties, were in all three cases precisely similar, which made it probable that the boys were schoolfellows. A couple of fishing-rods, supported on slender forked branches stuck firmly into the ground, overhung the water. The floats rested unwatched on the

surface; and a third rod lay neglected in the grass.

In the windless afternoon a heavy silence had fallen over the woods—a silence through which from time to time came the low, brooding note of a pigeon, monotonous, languid, sleepy, suggestive of a deep solitude. This peculiar, sylvan quiet had gradually enmeshed the fishers. They were really caught in it, like flies in a web, though they remained unconscious of the influence to which they had yielded. Yet it weighed upon them; the dreamy crooning of the pigeon hidden in the green distance weighed upon them like a spell; and the lively chatter of an hour ago had grown more and more intermittent, till, in the end, it had practically ceased.

It was Miles Oulton who suddenly sat up, like a sleeper awakened. "Hang it! there's a beastly fly or something crawled up my nose!" He began to blow vigorous trumpet notes into his handkerchief, while his companions were languidly amused. "Let's move away from here. The fish aren't going to bite."

"They're jumping out in the middle," yawned Palmer Dorset.

"And I told Evan he'd find us by the lake," said Beach.

But the charm was broken, and he, too, sat up. His clear, untroubled, blue eyes gazed through the trees in the direction that his friend would come from. Miles Oulton's glance also turned in that direction. A slight frown

wrinkled his forehead. He was very dark, of an almost swarthy complexion, with eyes as black as December midnights; and, though he was younger than both Beach and Palmer, a faint shadow of down lay already, like a dusky pencil stroke, upon his upper lip.

"He said he'd come this afternoon," Beach went on.

The sun gilded his flaxen hair and deepened to a warmer glow the fairness of his skin. He plucked a stalk of grass and began to tickle the ear of the red-haired, freckled boy who lay beside him.

"Oh, he'll come all right," answered Miles, turning again to the lake.

"Why do you say it in that tone?"

The reel of Miles's rod ticked noisily as he wound up his line. "I wasn't aware that I had said it in any particular tone," he replied. "If you want to know, however, I'm not specially keen on these National School chaps. The place will soon be overrun with them."

"Evan isn't like the others," Beach said, picking a handful of grass, and letting it drop through his fingers softly on the upturned face of Dorset. "He must be jolly clever, too, to have got a 'schol' at his age. He's only fifteen."

He seemed eager to defend the absent; perhaps a little too eager, for the corners of Miles's mouth drooped.

"They all get 'schols,'" he retorted contemptuously. "It's not because they're clever, it's because they 'swot' about nine hours a

day. Anybody could get a 'schol' who wanted to make a beast of himself like those bounders."

"I thought Hayes was a pal of yours," Palmer murmured sleepily.

"Well, he isn't."

"I know he isn't. I said I thought he *was*." Palmer's voice drowsed off into silence. It would have been difficult to say whether he had really fallen asleep or not.

"It was through you that *I* got to know him," Beach reminded Oulton in his turn.

Miles's face clouded. "I don't see what that proves. Anyhow, I'm fed up with him now."

"You're too hard to please," Palmer murmured, without opening his eyes. It was obvious that he was less interested in the discussion than the others were. "You should try to see the best in people, like Beach and me."

"Oh, you see a fat lot, I'm sure," answered Miles, irritably.

Something in what had been said appeared to have annoyed him. He was not, probably, particularly good-tempered. At the same time, of the three, he certainly would have been picked out by a passing spectator as the most interesting- and intelligent-looking. Very likely such an observer would have got the further impression that his temperament was more difficult, more given to alternations of enthusiasm and depression, hardly so well-balanced. Something of this sharpness of contrast no doubt owed its existence to the fact that the others appeared to be quite commonplace specimens of middle

class, healthy boyhood. Palmer Dorset indeed, in his present state of sleepiness, looked positively and contentedly stupid, while Beach, according to the verdict of his schoolmasters, never looked anything else.

"We see the best in you," Palmer went on, drowsily. "I pointed it out to Beach, and after a month or so he told me he could see it quite plainly. You've no idea of all the trouble we took." He yawned again, but suddenly brightened up, as if he had made a delightful discovery. "I don't know what you chaps feel like," he announced, "but I'm most infernally hungry:—I've only just realised it. Must be something in the air. I'm very sorry, Beach."

"Don't apologise."

"Oh, I know it isn't my fault, of course. But on the other hand:—well, I mean to say, it's a rather hot afternoon, and you look fairly comfortable."

Beach waited a moment for him to go on, but, as Palmer made no further remark, he presently said, "I'm afraid I don't quite see the connection."

"Don't you?" Palmer was much surprised. He proceeded, without loss of time, to point the connection out. "There's nothing here to eat."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, if you want any grub you can jolly well fag up to the house for it yourself."

"Give him some bait," Miles suggested, kicking the tin in Palmer's direction.

"Will that do, Dorset?"

"Of course it will do: he'll eat anything."

Palmer did not condescend to reply.

"Did you ever know him when he didn't want grub?" Miles went on, staring down at the red-haired boy, and prodding him tentatively in the ribs.

"I've certainly never known him to refuse it," Beach confessed.

"He's getting as fat as a pig:—just look at the shape of him."

Palmer stretched out his sturdy limbs in the heat. "I like everything that appeals to my animal feelings," he admitted. "I consider that that's one of my good points."

"You don't like anything else," said Miles, "and that's one of your bad ones."

"Oh, yes," Palmer said, "I like other things too. You ought to be aware of that, Oulton, in the light of my curious attachment to yourself. I regard my relation to you as——"

"Oh, dry up! My idea of *you* is, that you think you're too damned clever to live. What you need for a bit is to have your head smacked about twice a day."

"Who's going to do it?" inquired Palmer, blandly.

"I don't know; but I can tell you who'd jolly well like to do it—and that's about half the chaps in the school. You got off too easy when you were a kid."

"Here's Evan, now," Beach interrupted them, as a boy, wearing a dark-blue knickerbocker

suit, appeared, skirting the shore of the lake. He waved his hand in answer to Beach's hail, and the latter got up to go and meet him.

The other two remained where they were. Palmer lay back again on the grass, and shut his eyes. "What was it you fell out about?" he asked Miles, with a sort of guileless innocence. "I don't think you ever told me?"

"No, I don't think I ever did," Miles returned dryly. He sat with his beautiful, dark eyes fixed on Beach and Evan. "His mother has made him put on his Sunday clothes," he said, with a slight sneer.

Palmer did not look up. "Well, what's the harm in that? He's not a bad kid, really."

"Kid! He's nearly as old as I am, and only a year younger than you."

"A good many years younger, I imagine. You don't understand these things."

"I don't understand why Beach should have asked him up here," said Miles, gruffly. "His father's a clerk in my uncle's office."

Palmer this time very nearly opened one eye. The lid quivered and gave him a peculiar look. "What a beastly snob you would be, if you meant that! Fortunately, you have another reason. I don't say it's a better one, but at least it's more respectable."

Miles coloured hotly. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

But Palmer had no time to reply. "Hello, Hayes!" he called out cheerfully.

"Hello," answered the boy in dark blue, and he smiled at Miles Oulton, who nodded curtly.

Evan Hayes was slender and graceful as one of the young saplings in those woods through which he had just passed. He was very brown, without being dark, and his hair tumbled in a wave over his left temple (Palmer considered that it needed cutting). In comparison with the three other boys he might have appeared somewhat lacking in robustness. His manner suggested timidity, a certain shy charm that was perhaps slightly effeminate. He flushed easily, and spoke little, though, when he did make a remark, his voice, which had not yet begun to break, was soft and pleasant.

He stood, hesitating shyly, while Beach dropped down once more beside Palmer and Miles. Then he took a step forward, and, in doing so, trod on the top joint of Miles's fishing-rod.

He turned scarlet as he lifted up the two broken pieces and began to stammer out apologies.

"Why the blazes can't you watch where you're going?" shouted Miles, roughly.

"I didn't see it. I——"

"You could see it if you weren't blind. . . . Here, show it to me." He snatched the pieces rudely out of Evan's hand.

"What's the use of making a fuss about an accident?" said Beach, disgustedly.

"You can talk like that, of course, when it isn't your rod." With a face like a storm cloud, Miles freed the other two joints, and packed them all away in their canvas case.

"You can have my rod," Beach told him. "And, anyway, it was as much your fault as his, for leaving it where you did."

"I don't want your rod," retorted Miles, "nor your opinion either."

"Oh, very well. Sit down, Evan. It's all right. He can get the joint spliced."

Evan obeyed, while Palmer watched the whole scene with an inscrutable countenance. When nothing more seemed to be forthcoming, he poured a little oil upon the troubled waters by offering to splice the joint himself. "I can do it so that it will be just as good as it was before," he assured Miles. "Better, in fact, for the sort of fishing we do here, because it will be stronger. . . . Have you done your 'prep' for to-morrow, young Hayes?"

"No. . . . I had to go into town."

"How long do you take over your 'prep'?"

"Oh, it all depends. . . . I just go on till I get it done."

He looked at Palmer uncertainly. He was not quite at his ease. It was the first time he had come among these boys, except in a casual way at school. Moreover, though he had known that Beach's people were very wealthy, the sight of this immense place, from the inside (he had often seen it, of course, from the road), and the knowledge that he was presently to go up to the house and dine there, and be introduced to Mrs Traill, added to his shyness. He knew, too, that at school Palmer Dorset had hitherto ignored him, and Miles Oulton, who at the beginning had

been quite friendly, had suddenly, and, so far as Evan could see, for no reason, dropped him.

Miles it was who now got up. "I must be off," he announced brusquely. "It's nearly six o'clock. Are you coming, Dorset?"

"What on earth are you going for?" asked Beach. "Mummy expects you to stay:—I told her you would."

"Sorry, but I'm afraid I can't."

He spoke coldly enough, but Beach still persisted.

"Why must you go? You can telephone to say you're stopping, can't you? You're not in such a hurry as all that."

"Thanks; I have an engagement. . . . I suppose you're not coming, Dorset? . . . Well, good-bye."

He strode away quickly, but turned before he had gone thirty yards, and came back for his rod.

"You'd better leave it with me, and I'll fix it for you," said Palmer. "There's no use taking it away:—you'll only have to fag it back again. I'll do it to-night; it won't take me five minutes."

"I think I'll take it, thanks," said Miles. "I suppose I'll see you to-morrow, Dorset." And with a curt nod to Beach, a nod which did not include Evan, he again left them.

Evan sat looking at the ground, and plucking the grass near him. He was conscious that he had made trouble between Miles and Beach, and he did not know what to do to remove it. Nobody spoke for a minute or two. Then

Palmer murmured, as if to himself, "Il s'en va. . . . Il ne reviendra plus," he added presently, in a kind of dreamy sing-song. "Il ne reviendra plus. . . ."

"I don't know what's the matter with him," broke in Beach, impatiently; and as Palmer's faint smile seemed to express a kind of tolerant, half-humorous incredulity, he repeated this assertion with much more vigour. "And I don't know what's the matter with you, either," he went on angrily, "nor what you're grinning about."

"Don't you, really?" asked Palmer, with considerable interest.

"No; so you might kindly tell me."

But Palmer shook his head. "What must be, must be," he pronounced oracularly. "Il ne reviendra plus, all the same. Ask young Hayes."

"I suppose he's annoyed because I broke his fishing-rod," said Evan, without looking up.

"Yes," said Palmer, as if suddenly bored by the whole matter, "I suppose that's it."

Beach sat silent, a frown on his ingenuous, honest face. He did not understand moods; they only bewildered him; and Dorset's subtlety (if *he* understood) was equally incomprehensible. "Well, I'm sorry if I offended him, but I'm hanged if I know what I've done. He was always a queer-tempered chap at the best, and for the last week he seems to have been getting queerer. You'd think Evan had trodden on his beastly rod on purpose."

"A bite! a bite!" shouted Palmer, springing

to his feet. He seized the rod, and a few seconds later had landed his prize among the bracken, where it lay, its shining, shapely, silvery body flapping convulsively, till a knock on the head stilled it for ever.

"Do you always kill them?" asked Evan. "I thought the proper thing was to keep them alive as long as possible."

Palmer gave him a glance out of the corner of his eye. "You're a soft-hearted young devil, apparently. Is that the way *you'd* do?"

Evan did not reply, but a moment later there came the sharp sound of a branch snapping under a heavy foot, and, looking up, they saw Father O'Brien standing at a little distance, smiling benevolently upon them, his hands clasped behind his back. "I was told to remind you not to be late," he said. Then, with a little nod, he passed on, at his customary leisurely pace, which no one had ever seen him alter even on the coldest winter day.

"Who's that?" asked Evan, involuntarily, while he stared with very wide eyes after the erect, portly figure.

"Father O'Brien," answered Beach. "You'll see him at dinner, I expect. He's a frightfully decent chap really, when you get to know him."

"And at present he's cultivating an appetite," put in Palmer, irreverently. "Once round the lake does it. . . . Once round his waist goes twice round the water-butt."

Evan's astonishment died slowly, and he still continued to gaze after Father O'Brien.

"Yes, he's a priest," Palmer whispered loudly in his ear. "He's even a Jesuit. You didn't know what you were letting yourself in for by coming up here, did you?"

Evan coloured hotly. "I don't care what he is," he said.

"Well, don't get in a wax. I was only answering a question, you know."

"I didn't ask any question," said Evan, angrily.

"No; but, on the other hand, you so very nearly did."

Palmer soothingly patted him on the shoulder, and Evan jerked away.

"Oh, leave him alone, can't you," said Beach.

"He's at liberty to ask as many questions as he wants to."

"But I didn't want to," protested Evan, indignantly.

"Well, that's all right, then. Don't bother about what Dorset says; he loves annoying people. . . . You really do, you know," he added, turning to Palmer, "and you seem to have a sort of special talent for it."

### III

As they passed through a green door in an old, creeper-hung wall, the house came suddenly into view. It stood upon a low hill, and was built of red brick, with a balustrade running round its flat roof. The front faced towards the river; the garden, by which the three boys now approached, lay at the back and on the left-hand side. Bisecting a series of miniature lawns, each on a lower level than the last, a stream ran swiftly, widening out, at irregular intervals, in a green-lipped stone basin. In these still ponds goldfish glided between floating water-lilies; while over the lowest pool of all the dark, flat boughs of an immense cedar cast a heavy shadow.

To Evan the whole thing was a revelation of wonder and beauty, and he felt a thrill of excitement at being admitted to it. The air was sweet with the scent of flowers and aromatic shrubs; the turf was warm and smooth and rich as velvet; there were roses everywhere (yellow, white, pink, crimson), roses grafted on the trunks of old apple-trees, roses forming bowers and arches; no scentless, exotic blooms, but old-fashioned flowers, bee-haunted, sweet and hardy. . . .

At dinner he sat shy and silent. The strange-

ness of everything—the Latin grace pronounced by Father O'Brien; the soft, shaded lights; the flowers; the beautiful fruit; the deep, glowing colour reflected from the wine-glasses upon the white cloth; the silent movements of the servants; the pictures on the dark walls; above all, the beauty of the lady who spoke so pleasantly to him—produced upon his senses an effect at once unreal and intoxicating.

He seemed never to raise his eyes, and yet they were filled with this lady's beauty. His senses, like the strings of an instrument, quivered and vibrated to an unknown, enchanted music when she asked him about his school work, and other simple questions—questions that seemed wonderful, and never to have been asked before, and to each of which he responded with a nearly inaudible "No," or "Yes."

He accepted or refused the dishes that were offered to him, quite unconsciously; he even found one of the wine-glasses beside him filled with an amber-coloured wine. He tasted it fearfully, and his hand trembled so that he spilled a little on the cloth. No one seemed to notice that he had done so. He was confused by the different knives and forks, and furtively watched the others that he might imitate them. It was only when Mrs Traill lit a cigarette that his wonder overcame his shyness, and, slightly scandalised, he gazed at her with wide, still eyes, as she laughed and talked with Father O'Brien, while a little thread of blue smoke

came from her parted lips, and drifted through the air.

And this priest!—how different he was from Mr Torrens, his own clergyman, who often had tea with them! To Evan he did not seem like a clergyman at all. He never even mentioned church news—nor Sunday school, nor meetings, nor the people in his congregation, if indeed he had a congregation. He had a feeling of envy for Palmer Dorset, who appeared to be so completely at his ease, who had made more than one joke at which everybody had laughed, and who certainly had eaten as much as was good for him.

“What would you like to do?” Beach was asking. And before he could reply, Mrs Traill had said:—

“Take him to the library. I’m sure he’d like to look at the books.”

So they went to the library; but Evan, who could have spent a long time there, very soon perceived that the others were bored. He was taken up to Beach’s room to look at his collection of stamps, his various other treasures, and to watch him spar a round or two with Palmer Dorset.

“Are you sure you won’t have a turn?” Beach asked him, unwilling to leave him out, though he had already refused—“you and Dorset?” But Evan, from the window-seat, declared that he was far too comfortable to budge, and Beach and Palmer, now warming to their work, had a further and more animated bout.

To them here there presently came Father O'Brien, and a little later all four were walking down the path towards the back gate, Evan and Beach in front, Palmer and Father O'Brien dropping more and more in the rear.

"I don't know him very well," Palmer was saying, the conversation, adroitly managed by the priest, having branched in this direction. "But he seems all right."

"Beach appears to like him very much. It's the first time, I think, that he has been here."

"Yes."

"And who is *your* great friend?" Father O'Brien asked, smiling. "Is it Beach, too?"

"I don't think I have any great friend. Weston was my pal, if that's what you mean. But he's a boarder now, and I don't see much of him. He's been a boarder ever since his father and mother went away."

"What's the difference between a pal and a friend?" the priest asked.

"You said a great friend."

"Well, a great friend, then?"

Palmer considered the question. "Of course there really isn't any difference, but—— As a matter of fact, if you put it in that way, I don't suppose I've ever had a real pal. It's like this. I'd rather have Beach than Weston, but until Weston stopped being a day boy I went much more with him."

Father O'Brien seemed amused. "They both bore you more or less—is that it?"

"No, it isn't that at all. It's only that they have different ideas."

"From yours?"

"Yes."

"Ideas of any kind are rather uncommon amongst boys. At least I always found it so, and I've known a good many."

"Of course they're different with you from what they are when they're by themselves," Palmer informed him. "I daresay I'm about the only one who isn't—and you don't know me very well."

The priest smiled. He had sufficient tact not to tell Palmer that in quite a number of ways he found him extremely typical.

"I'll tell you one thing about boys. I don't mean this personally, you understand. It has nothing to do with you."

"Tell me, in any case," said Father O'Brien.

"Well, most of them pretty soon get fed up with people older than themselves. They can stick them for a time, and like them all right, but they don't want too much of them. I don't believe the older people often realise that. They imagine they're frightfully popular when they've simply been treated decently out of politeness."

"I am quite sure you're right," answered Father O'Brien, "and I won't forget your warning the next time I encounter the politeness you speak of."

"I didn't mean it for a warning," said Palmer. "And if you needed it you probably wouldn't think I was right. It applies to the type of

person who is said to 'understand' boys, or to have a 'splendid way' with them—you know the sort of rot."

"I do. I distinctly remember having heard both those descriptions used—on more than one occasion."

"Well, they're the sort of people I mean. They try to talk the way they think chaps talk, and to make rotten jokes, and be awfully juvenile; and at the same time to preach as hard as ever they can stick. We had a fool of that kind staying with us last winter—he was a sort of relation of the pater's, really—and he came to the school one afternoon to give a special address on 'True Manliness.' It was the limit—all about smoking cigarettes and pub-hunting. I had to be there, of course; and a lot of older people had been invited—the fathers and mothers of the boys, I mean. First of all Limpet—Doctor Melling, you know—got up and jawed for an hour or so in his usual style—any chap that didn't enjoy the address would get a thousand lines, and that sort of thing: at least, that's what it amounted to. Then this ass had his turn. He wasn't a bit like Limpet. He was frightfully jovial, and genial, and affectionate—simply spread himself all over the place. He started off by saying, 'Dear lads, I want you to feel that I'm just one of yourselves, for that is really what I am, and why I have come here to chat with you to-day.' You never heard such a lie in your life! It's exactly what he wasn't. And the rest of the address was all the same

kind of muck. Have you ever noticed that anybody who talks about 'lads' seems pretty well bound to be a rotter?"

"I never used the word," said Father O'Brien, hastily.

"I'm sure you didn't. Nobody but a blighter like that would. But the best of it was that the pater and all the other old fossils in the front row were simply hugging themselves with joy. They thought it was just the right thing; whereas there wasn't one of them—even the poor old pater himself, and that's saying a good deal—who couldn't have done a da—a hanged sight better without any fuss or preparation at all."

## IV

HAVING said good-night to the others at the gate, Beach walked home slowly through the gathering darkness, his hands deep in the pockets of his trousers, his eyes fixed on the ground. Sometimes he kicked a stone or stick out of his way. Once a weasel ran across his path, and once he saw a badger.

He was thinking of Evan. Evan Hayes had not been long at Osborne—Osborne School, that establishment so frequently and unfavourably criticised by Mrs Traill, who saw it altogether in the light of the progress her own son had made there—and for a still shorter time had he been one of Beach's chums. They were not even yet particularly intimate; but from the beginning, from the very first day he had seen him, and even before he had spoken to him, Beach had decided that he liked him. He liked him still more now. His friendship with Evan was somehow different from his other friendships, and it seemed to him that this difference made it more real. He liked, for instance, to keep Evan to himself, to be with him alone; he liked the sound of his voice; he noticed things about him that he had not noticed about anybody else—the slight hesitation of his manner, his shyness, the way he looked at you sometimes before he spoke

—many little details of a kind to which before, in other boys, he had been profoundly indifferent.

As he drew near the house he became aware that his mother was singing. He came closer still, and then paused. It was very pleasant out here in the cool, sweet-scented darkness, and Beach was just in the mood to listen to music—above all, to this particular kind of music. The song Mrs Traill sang was a simple, very antiquated ballad, distinctly of the drawing-room school, and probably for this reason it pleased her son greatly. He sat down on the doorstep. His mother had begun a second song of the same sort, and the words floated out to him through the open window:—

“When sparrows build, and the leaves break  
forth,

My old sorrow wakes and cries;  
For I know there is dawn in the far, far north,  
Where a scarlet sun doth rise.”

The music, and the sentimental words, filled him with a naïve emotion, and, as the last notes sounded, he felt their echo surging up in a strong, irrepressible wave within his own heart.

“We shall part no more in the wind and the  
rain,

Where our last farewell was said;  
But perhaps I shall meet you and know you  
again  
When the sea gives up her dead.”

Then the whole spell was abruptly and harshly broken by the sound of a man's voice. It was as

if a black, bitter wind had suddenly blown upon him, and, on the instant, all that he had been feeling was frozen dry, and his forehead wrinkled in a frown. The voice was Mr Oulton's voice, and it was to him that his mother had been singing. Beach got up from the step and entered the house.

Very quietly he went upstairs to his own room—his study, as it was called. He switched on the light, got out his books, and flung them roughly on the table. Then he sat down to do some "prep."

He opened the fifth book of the "*Æneid*"; also an English translation of the "*Æneid*"; and began to stumble through what seemed to him an utterly feeble and incompetent description of a boat race. Beach did not think he could have written a better description himself, but he was sure several of his class-mates could have—Olphert, for instance, or O'Donnell. It never occurred to him that Virgil had had any other intention than to write a school-book. A desire to give his readers pleasure was the last motive Beach would have attributed to this author, and nothing he heard in the course of his daily lessons was calculated to encourage such a view. If, by some chance, he had been required to conjure up a vision of the old poet, it would have been of a crabbed, uncomely creature poring over examination papers. As a matter of fact, he never considered him as a human being at all:—he was simply a text-book, bescribbled and defaced, a senseless invention of the pedagogic

mind. He went over the allotted passage twice with the aid of his crib; wrote out a list of words chosen at haphazard, to show that his work was serious; and pitched the book and the list into an armchair.

He leaned back, thrust out his legs, dived his hands deep in his trouser pockets, and stared gloomily at the ceiling. He made no attempt to do any more "prep"; he couldn't be bothered. A bookshelf hung on the wall directly before him—a bookshelf filled with novels and tales given to him at various periods by aunts and people—but he felt no more temptation to explore its resources than to explore those of his Latin grammar. Beach had taken nearly a month to get through "Allan Quatermain"; which, nevertheless, was in his opinion the best story he had ever read. Of most of the other works—"Ivanhoe," "David Copperfield," "Robinson Crusoe," to mention but the latest acquisitions—acquisitions dating from his last birthday—he had been content to look at the pictures. Even a catalogue of foreign stamps, which had arrived by post a few hours ago, failed to awaken his interest.

There came a tap at the door, and a servant entered with a message to ask him to come down to supper.

Beach did not move. Now that the door was open he could hear, very faintly, the sound of Mr Oulton's fiddle. "You can say I can't," he replied darkly. "Say that I'm busy; that I've a lot of work to do. I'll have my supper up here."

The door closed, and he lit a cigarette and began to smoke.

Five minutes later the door opened again, and this time his mother entered. Beach was seated at the table, apparently absorbed in the study of a large atlas. He looked up as she entered. He flushed slightly.

She crossed the room, and, leaning on his shoulders, bent down to look at what he was doing.

"Why have you taken so violently to work?" she asked, with a little laugh. "Surely you're not going to become a—what is it?—a 'swot'?"

But Beach did not respond to her half-caressing, half-playful manner.

"I want to get it over," he mumbled ungraciously. "You're always telling me that I ought to do more work. One would think you would be glad to see me——"

"I am glad, dear, of course; but can't you spare a quarter of an hour?" She stroked his fair hair, and her voice petted him. "Mr Oulton is downstairs. We've been having some music; he brought some to try over."

"I know that."

"Well, won't you come?"

"I can't come now. I'll come when I've finished, perhaps."

"And when will that be?"

"In an hour or two."

Mrs Traill laughed again, though perhaps not quite light-heartedly. "But, child, dear, you're surely not going to work till midnight? It's after ten now."

"I've got a lot of history to do when I've finished this—and an imposition." He mentioned this last item with a kind of gloomy bravado.

"History? Whose reign are you at?"

Beach hesitated. "I—I forget. . . . What are you laughing at?" he asked angrily. "It's Edward the Sixth, or somebody."

"Well, at least you have time to say good-night."

He got up. Standing there before her, he was as tall as she was, even a little taller. She put her hands on his broad shoulders.

"Am I really to say good-night now?" she asked, trying to make him look at her, but Beach kept his gaze obstinately glued to the floor.

"I suppose so."

He bent forward a little to receive her kiss.

"Good-night, then. I'll tell them to bring up your supper."

## V

EVAN, after saying good-bye to Father O'Brien and Palmer at the corner of the street, hurried on to his own house and rang the bell. His sister Winnie opened the door. Three years older than her brother, for nearly two years she had been a teacher in the school from which Evan himself had got his scholarship to Osborne. There was certainly no family likeness between them, no likeness even for those who have an eye for such things:—the pale, sharp-featured girl, high-shouldered to a degree that suggested deformity, had a peevish, discontented expression; she wore spectacles, and was decidedly plain.

Evan followed her into the parlour. An untidy heap of exercise-books lay at one end of the table, from which the white cloth had been folded back; but Winnie now gathered these together and put them away while her mother brought in supper. Mr Hayes, occupying the only armchair in the room, was reading a weekly paper.

He was a small, slight man of about fifty, very neatly dressed, with a grey moustache and beard. His features were clearly cut, his colouring much the same as Evan's; but just now the crude incandescent light fell directly upon the crown of his bald head, and his face—possibly

as a result of his recent studies—wore a rather owlsh look. He laid down his paper when Evan came in, and, like the others, gazed expectantly at him. Then his eyes turned to follow the movements of his wife, who was arranging the plates of porridge on the table.

“I see that Sir Walter Scott was able to repeat a long poem word for word after hearing it read only once.”

The remark was somehow peculiarly characteristic. To Evan, with the glamour of things utterly different still fresh and glowing in his mind, it was exasperatingly so. A few hours earlier he would not have noticed it, but now, in its innocuous flatness, it struck him like an object, soft and damp and flabby, thrown in his face. He felt depressed and irritated, and as he glanced round the room, taking in all its familiar details, a feeling of active hostility, such as he had never before experienced, began to stir within him. There was a stain upon the tablecloth. He had made it himself that morning at breakfast, but he did not think of this; he thought only that the cloth might surely have been changed. There was an ink stain on one of Winnie's fingers. The stupid little geranium in its stupid little pot looked sickly and weedy, like something picked up from a refuse heap.

“You wouldn't have much trouble with your examinations, Evan, if you had a memory like that.”

“Oh, he does quite well enough with his examinations,” said Mrs Hayes, contentedly.

She cast a rapid glance round to see that she had left nothing behind her in the kitchen, and then called out, "Well, now, perhaps you'll all sit in and take the porridge while it's hot."

Mrs Hayes had not worn so well as her husband. Her face was a good deal lined, and in the firm set of her features, when seen in repose, there was even a hint of sourness. But this expression entirely belied her disposition, which was both cheerful and hospitable. Her scanty hair was twisted into a hard little knot at the back of her head, and her clothes seemed to have been chosen on a rigorous principle which eliminated everything that might possibly be becoming.

It was Mr Hayes who, tired of waiting for his son to speak, now voiced the silent question of the whole family. "Well, Evan, did you have a pleasant time?"

"Yes."

The boy stood by the chimney-piece, with an air of aloofness, perfectly conscious that they all, particularly his father, were waiting for an account of what he had done and said and heard and seen, even of what he had drunk and eaten, but equally conscious that, for some reason, he did not wish to give one. Everything about him—Winnie and her exercise-books, his father and his paper, the furniture upholstered in black horsehair, the gas stove, the porridge—all these things which he had been familiar with from his earliest childhood—now, as by the touch of a magician's wand, had become infinitely distasteful to him,

The feeling was so strong that it shut out everything else, and the fact that the others were so obviously unconscious of it merely made it stronger. He would have liked to tell them about it, he would have liked, indeed, to put it into the plainest words. . . . Only his mother remained untouched by her surroundings.

Mr Hayes, from the foot of the table, gazed at him for a moment or two with great earnestness. Then his thought found speech, and he said, "Come here, dear. What happened your collar?"

Evan moved towards him with visible reluctance, and drew away again when his father put out an exploring hand.

"Why didn't you put on one of the collars I bought for you the other day?"

"I don't like them."

He was astonished at his own voice, which sounded hard and dry, coldly inimical. His father seemed even more surprised, though he only repeated very mildly, "You don't like them! Why don't you like them?"

"They're not the right shape. Nobody wears collars like that."

"What's the matter with their shape? If you aren't going to wear them you'd better give them to me to get changed. There's no use my buying collars for you just to have you waste them."

"If you'd let me buy my own things I could get the proper sort," said Evan.

Mr Hayes did not reply, but he looked hurt, and still more hurt when his wife, after a quick

glance at her son, a glance which also showed surprise, took the boy's part. "He's old enough now to choose his own things," she said. "He knows what the other boys wear."

"We need hardly ask if you want any supper," she went on, humorously. "You've been having too many good things to-night, I expect."

"Probably they dine late every night?" Mr Hayes could not help suggesting, but the slightly interrogatory note which he threw into his voice elicited no response from Evan.

"That reminds me of what I was telling Mr Torrens about you."

He waited a moment, a little smile hovering uncertainly on his lips, but Evan still did not respond. From long experience the boy could guess what was coming, and so, apparently, could the others, for Mrs Hayes merely broke in with, "Come, papa, your porridge is getting cold."

Under the chilling douche of this indifference Mr Hayes subsided, leaving his story untold. He was easily snubbed. On such occasions he was quick to draw within his shell, though something in his nature—an overwhelming curiosity, really—made him equally prompt to come out again.

"Was anyone else there?" Winnie asked her brother.

"Yes."

"Another boy?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"A boy called Dorset."

Then, to avoid further questioning, he added,

"Miles Oulton was there too, but he had to go home before dinner."

"They're very nice-looking boys, those Oultons," Mrs Hayes interposed appreciatively. "Very gentlemanly-looking boys. I always think that when I see them walking with their cousin to church."

"What did you say the other guest's name was?" Mr Hayes inquired suddenly, as usual a sentence or two in arrear.

"Palmer Dorset."

"Palmer Dorset! That's a very peculiar name. I never heard you mention him before."

"I don't know him very well."

Mr Hayes pondered the possibilities of Palmer Dorset, but prudently refrained from further interruptions.

"He's Professor Dorset's son, I suppose," said Winnie. "Isn't he, Evan?"

"Yes."

She looked at her brother, who still remained standing on the hearthrug, leaning back against the chimney-piece, his hands in his pockets. There was a light in his eyes, and a flush on his cheeks, that made him wonderfully handsome—even his crumpled collar seemed only to add to this effect. She could not have been unconscious of it, yet possibly what it chiefly awakened in her was a sense of the contrast between them (a contrast so cruelly conspicuous!), for her thin lips closed tightly, giving to her mouth a malicious and unpleasant expression.

"He ought to be clever, then," said Mr Hayes. "You can't be a professor without having some-

thing under your hat. So there were just the four of you?"

"Beach and his mother and Dorset and myself."

"You'll have to ask Beach to tea some night," Mrs Hayes decided hospitably. "You could ask Palmer Dorset too, and perhaps Miles Oulton and his brother. . . . Would it do to ask the Oultons, papa?"

Mr Hayes was not quite certain on this point. He thought it might do if the other boys came. "But Mr Oulton's not the sort of man you can — I mean, he's not at all affable. He might think——"

"Well, we can do without the Oultons. Evan can ask Beach and young Dorset."

Evan still remaining dumb, Mr Hayes had a really brilliant idea. "He might ask them on the night of the church concert, and take them to the concert afterwards. . . . If you remind me in the morning, Evan, I'll see about tickets." He beamed with a sense of the felicity of this programme, which, however, he was not left to enjoy for long.

"It would be much better to have them on another night," said Mrs Hayes, decidedly, "and let them spend the evening here. Don't you think, Evan, they would enjoy that more?"

"I don't know," Evan mumbled.

"How would it do to give them their choice, mother?" Mr Hayes suggested. He was loth to give up his plan of the concert, but ready, if necessary, to compromise. "Or he could have Beach twice, if it comes to that."

It was Winnie who, amid these speculations, detected a lack of enthusiasm on her brother's part. "Don't you *want* to have them?" she asked, springing the question on him with the calculated abruptness of a professional cross-examiner.

His reply was inaudible, and Winnie, conscious of having hit the right nail on the head, followed up her advantage with a spiteful determination. "Perhaps we're not good enough?"

"Winnie!" Mrs Hayes said sharply.

But the girl was not to be put off. "I'm only telling the truth. If it's not true, why has he got so red?" She laughed shrilly, pointing an accusing and triumphant finger at the guilty Evan.

"I never said I didn't want them," he protested, darting a furious glance at his sister. "I don't see what the desperate hurry is—that's all. I've only been to Beach's once, and I haven't been to Dorset's at all, and am never likely to be."

Mr Hayes pricked up his ears at this. "There's no reason why Dorset need be asked," he declared fussily.

"I couldn't possibly ask him."

"Beach could come by himself. . . . You could at any rate mention that about the concert, Evan. Don't make too much of it, of course; but just mention it."

"Oh, papa and his concert!" ejaculated Mrs Hayes. Then she suddenly recollected a message Mr Torrens had left with her for her son. "Mr

Torrens wants you to go and see *him* some time. He was asking for you to-night. He's getting up a Communion class, and thought you might like to join."

In the pause that followed, Evan, who had gradually been edging nearer and nearer the door, stretched out his hand to open it, but his father called him back.

"We told him we would rather not urge you in any way. In fact, mother said she thought you were perhaps a little too young yet. You'd better go and see him, however, whether you decide to attend the class or not."

"Oh, I don't think that's necessary," said Mrs Hayes, good-humouredly. "You can easily let Mr Torrens know yourself, papa."

Evan hovered uneasily behind his mother's chair. "I think I'd better go and do some work," he said.

But at this Mr Hayes, who, having finished supper, was again burying himself in his paper, looked up. "Haven't you done your lessons yet? You should have done them before you went out."

"That's all right, papa. He went into town for me."

Evan kissed her, and kissed his father, good-night.

"Don't be sitting up late now, and wasting the gas," Mr Hayes called after him. "You'd be far better to rise early in the morning and do your lessons then."

## VI

EVAN'S room was at the back of the house. He closed the door, and, walking over to the window, looked out for a moment before lighting the gas. There was nothing to be seen except a dim expanse of grazing-fields, colourless and empty, bisected by a straight dark line of hawthorn hedge, which showed where the road ran. In the daytime, too, the view was uninteresting—if anything, more uninteresting than it was now; and in wet weather, when the low-lying land was half submerged by water, it was positively depressing.

The night was warm, and, taking off his jacket and waistcoat, he lay down on his bed. He had a pile of school-books beside him. His hands twisted the edge of the sheet, or fumbled at his braces; his eyes were wide open; but his school-books lay untouched, just as he had tumbled them there in a heap. He caught up one of them as he heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs, but dropped it again when the steps passed his room and went on up the next flight. Then he heard his father locking the hall door. He listened to the rattle of the chain (Mr Hayes always secured the house as if against a siege); he listened to his mother's voice calling down from an upper landing,

"Don't turn off the meter, papa—Evan's gas is lit." A bedroom door slammed, opened, and slammed again, before the house finally settled down to the silence of the night. . . .

He began to go over in memory all that he had seen and done that afternoon. He put himself in Beach's position; he pictured what his life would be under similar circumstances; his imagination luxuriated in a multitude of fanciful details. He thought what it would be like to wake in the morning, and look out over that beautiful stretch of park and woodland down to the dark, winding river; of what it would be like to work in the library, seated in a big leather armchair beside the open window. He thought of all he would be able to do; and on Beach, he decided, everything was wasted! Beach did nothing that he, Evan, would have done. When Evan had questioned him, he had said that he liked the old place, but had said it without any enthusiasm, just as if it meant very little to him. He thought of the pictures on the walls, of the wide, low staircase, of the beautiful gardens. . . .

Then he realised that if he were going to work at all he must get up and sit at the table. He did so. He opened his Virgil and plodded through a dozen lines, but his mind was really too saturated with the impressions of the last few hours to do more than wander in a similar world. He thought of Father O'Brien; and, more than anything else, he thought of Mrs Traill. He idealised her beauty. In the bold-

ness of solitude he admired it and dwelt upon it, inventing tragic scenes in which she leaned over him and took him in her arms and kissed him. In the rich virgin soil of his imagination, strange flowers of emotion sprang up and bloomed with a tropical luxuriance, filling the summer night, filling his soul, with their colour and fragrance. Mrs Traill, certainly, would have been, to say the least, astonished, had she been privileged to look on at a few of these dramas in which she figured, with Evan as hero. They altered in detail, but the broad outline was in all pretty much the same, the innocently passionate *dénouement* invariably so. With liquid, half-shut eyes, and parted lips, he leaned back, gazing at the entrancing visions swimming before him, till gradually they grew weaker, flickered, and died out. Suddenly he realised that all this was only dreaming. What was real was the horrid little parlour downstairs, and the church concert, and his father, and Winnie, and Mr Torrens, and the Communion class. He felt ashamed of his life and of his surroundings; he felt angry with his own people for not being more distinguished. How could he ask Beach to the house?

The difference was too great. Why, he had actually been afraid to mention Father O'Brien! If he had done so, he might have been forbidden to go to Brédagh again. For the first time in his life—except when he had been ill—Evan went to bed and to sleep without having finished his work for the next day.

## VII

ON the following morning Beach was later than usual in setting out for school. In the old days he had been accustomed to ride there on a bicycle, but Evan walked, so for the past week or two Beach had walked also, calling for his friend on the way.

He hurried, once or twice breaking into a trot, having an uncomfortable instinct that Evan would not wait for very long. Certainly he would not risk being late for school. Beach had never had a chum who was so opposed to breaking rules, so opposed to doing anything one oughtn't to do. Evan was a model in this respect. He was never in detention; he never got an imposition; his work was always admirably prepared: in fact, his conduct closely resembled that of a type of boy which Beach had hitherto regarded with pronounced disapproval.

He reached the Hayes's house not more than five minutes after his usual time. He whistled, which was the accustomed signal of his arrival, but there was no reply, and after waiting for a little he rang the bell. He rang it twice—the second time more vigorously than he had intended to—and was on the point of turning away when Mrs Hayes, swathed in a kind of linen overall, a duster in her hand, and a blue

and white spotted cloth wound round her head, answered the door.

She had never spoken to Beach, but on several occasions she had peeped at him through the window, and of course knew him by sight. She had come to the door, however, expecting to find the grocer's boy there, and to rebuke him for his impatience, so that the sudden change in her expression, when she found herself face to face with her son's friend, was remarkable. Beach stared at her and asked for Evan. He hadn't the faintest idea who she was. It did not even occur to him that she might be Evan's mother until she began to apologise for keeping him waiting. Then he, too, apologised for disturbing her (it was quite obvious that he had really done so), and they shook hands.

"Evan's gone," she said. "He left about ten minutes ago."

Beach's face fell. He had half expected this to happen, yet his disappointment seemed none the less keen. "I—I'm late, of course," he stammered. "I suppose he thought I wasn't coming."

Mrs Hayes looked puzzled. An elderly Aberdeen terrier came waddling down the street, and paused thoughtfully at the gate of her garden. With a tentative paw he gently pushed the gate open, just wide enough to admit his body, and then paused again. Two seconds later his head slowly insinuated itself through the aperture, and his eyes met those of Mrs Hayes. They stood stock-still, staring at each other—it was evident

that it was not their first encounter. "Shoo!" cried Mrs Hayes, with a suddenness extremely startling to Beach, who—his back being turned to the intruder—took the remark for a moment as addressed to himself. "It's that MacNab," she explained, flapping her duster energetically—a demonstration regarded by MacNab with more interest than alarm. "He's never out of here." Beach closed the gate.

"Evan might have waited," Mrs Hayes went on, noting the boy's crestfallen appearance. "There's plenty of time, isn't there, if you'd taken the tram?"

"Yes. He usually walks, of course. It doesn't matter."

Mrs Hayes, however, seemed to think it did matter. "I don't like that sort of thing. Especially after you taking the trouble to call for him every morning."

"It's on my way," Beach explained, "and I like company."

"It was good of you asking him up to the house, too. It was very kind of your mother."

"Oh, mummy was very glad to have him."

"We want you to come to *us* some evening. You must arrange an evening with Evan. Now, won't you? I want you to see me when I haven't a turban on my head." She smiled upon him her queer, wry smile.

"Thanks very much, I'd like to come," said Beach.

"And we'd like to have you, so we all ought to be pleased. . . . Well, I won't keep you

now; but just you give Evan a good talking-to."

Beach departed. His conference with Mrs Hayes, nevertheless, had considerably delayed him, and he did not arrive at school until nearly ten minutes after the bell had stopped ringing. He decided not to go in to first period at all, for if he did so, at this time of day, it would mean that he would have to come back to detention; whereas, to-morrow, he could get "mummy" to write him an excuse. He walked slowly up the broad path between the two playing-fields, the long low façade of the school directly before him, sprawling right across the ground, its red brick and plaster smoke-darkened and time-stained, its many small windows opened to the summer morning. There was nothing in the least attractive about this naked, rather dreary building. Age had not succeeded in making it venerable: it looked merely dingy—pathetically, almost humanly dingy. Yet Beach liked it—liked it just as it was—and there was beauty, at all events, in the dusty gold light flickering through trembling branches that overtopped a high side wall. He loitered in the cool shadow of the porch, and presently saw young Tom Oulton come out from the mathematical schools and run across the quadrangle. Tom was apparently in a great hurry, but when he spied Beach he halted, spun round, and came to him.

"I say, I've got a letter for you from Janet," he piped. "Here!" He held the letter out.

Beach took it, while Tom stood on one leg and watched him with bright, merry eyes.

He was a plump little boy, bare-kneed, with apple-red cheeks and inky paws, always laughing, and seldom out of rows. "Aren't you going to open it?" he asked inquisitively.

"There's plenty of time. . . . What are you doing out of class?"

"What are you? Johnson sent me to get some exam. papers from Limpet. What's Janet writing to you about?"

"Don't be so beastly curious," said Beach. "Cut along now, before I smack your head."

"You can carry your own notes in future," cried Tom, wrathfully. "I suppose you think you're a big man because you get letters from girls."

Beach shot out a large hand, and grabbed Tom by the collar of his jacket. The little boy struggled vigorously, spluttering various threats of a bellicose nature; but he felt himself slowly lifted from the ground, held up like a small sack, and not very roughly shaken.

When he was once more set upon his feet, he gazed at Beach admiringly. "I say, I believe you're nearly as strong as the sergeant. Let's feel your muscle."

Beach was quite agreeable. He even removed his jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves, that Tom might see as well as feel his biceps. The inspection concluded—and it was by no means a hurried one—Tom bethought him of his errand,

"Well, so long ; I'll have to bunk, or Johnson'll be getting his wool off."

He disappeared, and Beach, sitting down on one of the green, wooden cricket-boxes, opened Janet's letter.

It was short, and extremely to the point.

"DEAR BEACH,—Will you meet me at the Park gate on your way home? There's something important I want to talk to you about.—Yours,

"JANET OULTON.

"P.S.—If you can't come to-day, tell Tom when you *can* come, but don't say anything to Miles. I'll wait for half an hour in case you're kept in.

"J. O."

Beach read this epistle, while a slight frown gathered on his face. He had intended to play cricket that afternoon, and now he wouldn't be able to. Moreover, the final sentence of the postscript struck him as distinctly unnecessary. "I wonder what the nation she's up to!" he muttered half aloud, as he crumpled the note into his pocket. He had very little faith in the importance of what Janet had to tell him, and a great deal in the importance of cricket; but, of course, he must go to meet her.

He kicked his heels against the sides of the box as he reflected on girls in general. They always liked to manufacture a mystery out of nothing. Why couldn't she tell him what she wanted and have done with it? It might easily be that she wanted nothing but the pleasure of

his company. At any rate, it was an infernal nuisance. Janet was a decent girl, as girls went,—the decentest he knew,—but you couldn't be up to her; she was full of tricks, and didn't care a hang what she did so long as she got her own way.

He was still pondering the situation when the bell rang, and from open doors on every side boys poured out into the sunshine. Beach wanted to talk to Evan, but he found it impossible to get him alone. Between the classes there was very little time, and only one or two of the masters allowed the boys to choose their desk companions. In the English room, for example, where he now had to go, Limpet made them sit in the alphabetic order of their names. Dorset and Hayes were fairly close together (not that they wanted to be), but he, Beach, sat right at the back of the room, between two boys called Thompson and Trainor, learned little "smugs," with faked-up, rotten principles that forbade them to prompt. Then, in "maths" he had always sat between Palmer Dorset and Weston, at a small desk for three, and Beach was not going to desert old friends simply because he had taken a sudden fancy to Evan. So it was not till fourth period that they at last found themselves together.

## VIII

"DARN it all; Ledgy's taking the class!" said Edward Weston, as he and Beach and a few others comprising their particular set, after jostling for a minute or two in the passage, opened the class-room door.

"It's just like him!" Beach muttered, coming to a standstill on the threshold. He had half a mind to turn back, but was pushed on from behind, and, crossing the room, he took his place beside Evan, and as far away from Mr Ledgerwood as possible.

"You'll have to prompt me," he whispered. "I haven't even looked at the beastly grammar, and I can't stay in after school—I've got to meet Janet Oulton."

"I haven't looked at it myself," Evan amazingly replied.

Beach stared. "Why?" he asked. "But you know it all, any way," he added, with a sigh of relief.

"I've got the translation written out," Evan whispered. "Cantillon gave me a copy."

Beach frowned. "I wouldn't ask a swine like that for a copy." He would have added something more had he not become conscious that Mr Ledgerwood's cold grey eyes were fixed upon him.

"I wonder why it is, Traill, that you have always so much to say when you come into class? At other times you strike me as a boy of singularly few ideas. However, since you seem determined to enjoy the sound of your own voice, you'd better begin to construe."

Beach grinned sheepishly, and stared down at his book.

He could have given a vague and impressionistic version from what he remembered to have read last night, and this version, with a little assistance from Evan, would have more or less satisfied Dr Gwynn, who was getting old and grey and full of sleep. But Mr Ledgerwood was very different. He had a remarkably quick ear, and a still quicker eye, so that in his classes prompting became not only difficult but dangerous—too dangerous, at all events, for Evan to care to run the risk. Moreover, he insisted on a word-for-word translation—one in which a perfect accuracy was the only thing that mattered—and Beach knew very well that perfect accuracy was utterly beyond him.

"Well, Traill, we're waiting for you," Mr Ledgerwood reminded him, with exuberant geniality. "Don't keep the whole class in suspense. The class is naturally eager to hear how you will translate this particular passage. The class, one might almost say, is in a state of breathless expectancy."

The class began to be amused, and Mr Ledgerwood, a quite young man, who delighted

in these uneven contests, stirred himself to further efforts.

"Our friend Traill hesitates through modesty," he explained to the room at large. "He asks himself, were it not better that he should come in after school and write the lesson out, than dazzle the other boys by a brilliancy which might arouse envy. . . . But no! Traill has changed his mind. He is going to favour us after all."

Evan had passed Cantillon's paper along under the desk, and Beach had begun to construe, slowly and deliberately, with an elaborate air of extreme carefulness.

He continued in a profound silence. He seemed to be getting along swimmingly—not too fast and yet not too slowly—now and then throwing in an artistic and effective hesitation before a particular word; but he wondered why he was being kept on for so long, and why the room had grown so quiet. He looked up uneasily. Mr Ledgerwood had risen from his chair and was gazing at him with great interest. Their eyes met for the fraction of a second; then Mr Ledgerwood spoke, but with an ominous politeness,—the sort of politeness that precedes quite different things.

"Traill, might I trouble you to keep your hands just as they are at present—keep them on the desk, that is. Thank you. Now tell me, have you a translation there?"

Evan, with remarkable presence of mind, had already removed the paper which had been spread out on Beach's knees.

"No, sir," he replied.

Mr Ledgerwood strode down the room.

"Stand up, Traill."

Beach stood up, his face scarlet.

"Thank you; that will do. I thought you were telling me a lie. I beg your pardon."

Suddenly he wheeled round. "Weston," he shouted, "you appear to be taking a great interest in all this. Go on from where Traill left off. . . . Stand up, Weston, and speak out. Don't mumble. We like to hear the sound of your voice in other places as well as on the cricket field. Why are you crushing up so close to Dorset? We all know Dorset is a friend of yours, but he is a stout boy, and requires room to breathe. . . . Now then, Weston: you have our attention."

Edward Weston, a tall, handsome boy, very fair, and at present extremely embarrassed, rose to his feet. He cleared his throat twice, and Mr Ledgerwood smiled sardonically.

"You appear to be rather hoarse to-day, Weston. I hope you haven't caught cold?"

"No, sir."

Weston cleared his throat for the third time, and cast an agonised glance at Palmer Dorset.

Mr Ledgerwood, re-seating himself, lolled back in his chair, and stifled a yawn behind his Virgil.

"The *Pristis*," Weston began. "And now the *Pristis*——"

"Yes, Weston. The *Pristis*——?"

"And now—the *Pristis*. . . . The *Pristis* ——"

The corners of Mr Ledgerwood's mouth gave

a downward twitch. "The *Pristis* is figuring very largely in your translation, Weston. Too largely, some of the other boys seem to think. They think you have been making out your batting average when you should have been preparing your lesson. They think you ought to come in after school. . . . There's no match on to-day, is there?"

"No, sir; but there's a practice."

"I see. . . . The celebrated Palmer Dorset will also come in. Palmer Dorset is anxious to assist Weston, so we will allow him to do so later on. In fact, we will give them both as much time as they could possibly desire. . . . Barney Meharg will make the third in this brilliant trio. Barney Meharg is greedy. The thought of lunch-time being so near is too much for him. Barney Meharg prefers lunch to Latin, and by guzzling secretly and disgustingly insults those other boys who prefer Latin to lunch. They would be indignant if I overlooked Barney Meharg's conduct, and might even suspect me of favouritism."

Barney Meharg grinned feebly. His pals seemed overjoyed, and signified in various ways how deeply they had been insulted. Mr Ledgerwood's glance wandered languidly over the room. "Suppose we forsake the incapables now and try somebody else," he drawled. "Hayes, will you kindly go on? No; you needn't stand up."

Evan proceeded to translate—not brilliantly, rather stumbly for him, though he knew enough Latin to excogitate a fairly accurate construe. He did not make use of Cantillon's

paper. He might have risked it with Dr Gwynn, but he ran no risks with Ledgy. Mr Ledgerwood was dissatisfied: he was also surprised, for he knew that Hayes had brains, and was not a slacker. Evidently, however, this sort of thing was good enough for Dr Gwynn, so he passed him. Why should he interfere?

The lesson droned on. Nobody, apparently, with the exception of Hayes and two other boys, both notorious "swots," knew anything. Dr Gwynn, Mr Ledgerwood reflected, really ought to be asked to resign. It was scandalous the harm obstinate and obtuse old men were allowed to do, merely because people did not care to hurt their feelings. Mr Ledgerwood's questions became more and more elementary. Then Beach stuck in the declension of *dominus*, and that was the last straw. Mr Ledgerwood gave the whole class the first and second declensions to learn for the next day, as a delicate criticism, which Dr Gwynn might either profit by or reject as best suited him. During the remainder of the time he told his pupils what he thought of them, painting unflattering pictures of their prospects in life, till the clang of the bell put a term to these gloomy prognostications.

"You got out of that all right," laughed Evan, as he followed Beach downstairs.

"I didn't get out of it at all," answered Beach, shortly.

"Well, keep your wool on; it wasn't my fault. I did all I could."

"I didn't say or think it was your fault. But you might have waited for me this morning."

"I did wait."

"Not for very long."

"I waited till I thought you weren't coming," said Evan. "You needn't make such a fuss about it."

"Why would I not be coming?"

"I don't know. I thought you were late and would ride in. Are you going to walk home?"

"I'm going to walk as far as the Park, but I have to meet Janet Oulton there, and I can't tell how long she'll keep me." He hesitated. "You couldn't work in the afternoon, I suppose, and come up this evening?"

Evan shook his head. "I'm afraid not," he replied. He smiled, and seemed perfectly contented; and this too, for some reason, discouraged Beach.

## IX

ALL trace of his annoyance had, however, disappeared when he rejoined Evan after school. Palmer Dorset was hanging about the porch, waiting to go in to detention, or perhaps waiting to speak to Beach, for he hailed him as he and Evan passed.

"Are you going home? I thought you were going to stay and play cricket? If I come up in an hour or so will you be in?"

Beach stopped. He had quite forgotten to tell Palmer about his appointment with Janet: he had only told Evan. "I don't know—I don't think so," he answered, explaining the difficulties of his position.

"Well, I'll see you to-morrow, then."

Evan, who had been hovering more or less in the background, at this suddenly and unexpectedly joined in. "Do you want to go for a walk, Dorset?"

Both of the other boys appeared surprised, and Evan, conscious of having somehow made a blunder, coloured while he waited for Palmer to reply.

He had indeed to wait perceptibly, and with a growing sense of mortification. Palmer looked at him with slightly narrowed eyes.

"No. . . . Why?" he said at last.

Evan turned away to hide his discomfiture.

"Oh, I just thought——"

"You don't mean to say you go for *walks* every day!" Palmer exclaimed, wrinkling his forehead.

"Why shouldn't he go for a walk if he wants to?" asked Beach, quickly.

"Why, indeed?" Palmer echoed, grabbing Weston, who had just appeared, by the arm. "This way, young fellow. Ledgy's waiting for you." And they moved off together, leaving Beach and Evan to settle the matter between them.

A trace of his heightened colour still lingered in Evan's cheeks. He was furiously angry. "I wish I hadn't——" he began, and then stopped, biting his under lip. "He's a queer sort of fellow," he said, as they walked on.

"Who? Dorset?"

"Yes."

"He is, a bit," Beach agreed. He was far from realising what Evan felt at that moment, but he knew the situation had been for a few seconds distinctly awkward, and he tried to ease it off as well as he could. He himself felt annoyed with Dorset. Of course Palmer had regarded Evan's proposal as cheek:—all the same, he might have taken it differently, if only for the sake of good manners. "He's not so queer when you get to know him," he explained, a little lamely. "He's really jolly decent——"

"He may be. I haven't seen much sign of it."

The matter might have dropped there had not Evan, in the brief pause that followed,

suddenly recollected the suggestions which had been thrown out last night by his own people, about asking Dorset to the house, about asking even Miles Oulton. The remembrance of those infelicitous proposals made him feel still sorer. "He seemed to be trying to sit on me for speaking to him," he began bitterly. "It's the last time I'll ever ask him for his company, anyway."

Beach thought it best to take the matter lightly. "Oh, you only imagine that," he said, as if Evan himself had not really meant it. "Of course he swanks a good deal now and then; but he's all right when you get to understand him:—it's only his manner. . . . By the way, I think you *should* start cricket, you know. You ought to play some game."

This remark, following on what had just taken place, was certainly not the most fortunate he could have made, but Beach was far from being a diplomatist.

"I suppose I can please myself," Evan snapped, and relapsed into silence.

"Of course. But that's all Dorset meant. And I think you'd like cricket if you once began. . . . I know I'm no good myself, and Dorset's worse—football is our game, though we're nothing very wonderful at it either. Still, cricket's a jolly sight better than mugging about doing nothing."

"I don't mug about," Evan returned coldly, "and I've plenty to do. In any case, I'm quite capable of looking after myself."

At that moment Miles Oulton and another boy

passed them, turning down towards town. Miles barely nodded, but the other boy gave Evan a friendly slap on the shoulder.

Beach looked after them. "You're surely not a pal of Cantillon's, are you?" he asked.

Evan's face clouded, and he gave Beach an angry look. He found this manner of taking charge of him, as if he were a young brother, extremely irritating, and not at all necessary. "No: why should I be?" he muttered.

"Well, he apparently thinks you are; and the sooner you let him know to the contrary, the better."

"At any rate, he doesn't think the sun shines out of him, the way Weston and Dorset and some of your friends do," answered Evan. "He knows how to speak civilly to you."

"It's about all he does know, then," Beach replied; "except what he shouldn't."

"It isn't all. It was very decent of him giving me that construe to-day. He wrote it out for me specially. It saved *your* skin, too."

"It wasn't decent. Nothing he ever did in his life was decent. He's an outsider, and he'll be fired before all's over—the sooner the better."

Evan shrugged his shoulders. "Oulton seems to like him pretty well," he said.

The innuendo was lost upon Beach, who indeed usually missed such things. "Then Oulton's a fool. Besides, he doesn't like him—nobody could."

"If he doesn't, it's very good of him to go with him so much," Evan sneered.

Beach quickened his pace; he was beginning to feel decidedly ruffled by the tone of Evan's remarks, which, very unreasonably he thought, appeared to be directed principally against himself.

"Who told you he went with him?" he asked.

"Cantillon told me; and I've seen them together."

"It must be quite lately then:—he never used to go with him. Besides, Cantillon's the biggest liar on the face of the earth—you needn't believe all *he* tells you."

"I know you've got a spite against him," said Evan.

Beach turned quickly, with a frown. "You *know*?" he repeated, accenting the last word angrily.

Evan gave ground, though only momentarily. His voice, however, was perceptibly more conciliatory as he answered: "Yes; he told me you had—you and Dorset and Weston and Doherty and one or two others—but particularly you."

"When did he give you this interesting information?"

"He gave it to me yesterday," said Evan. "I met him in town."

"But what started him to talk about it?" Beach persisted, obstinately. "Something must have. He wasn't likely to begin to talk about me unless he had some reason to do so."

"I told him I was going up to see you."

"Why? What business was it of his?"

"He wanted me to go with him."

Beach's face grew darker still. "Cantillon did? Where did he want you to go to?"

"To play billiards somewhere. He offered to teach me. There's nothing wrong with him so far as I can see."

"No, I suppose not:—quite a nice sort of chap, in fact. And he was going to take you into a pub, I daresay?"

Evan coloured.

Beach thought for a moment or two while they walked on, not quite abreast, Evan being slightly behind.

"You hadn't been with him before, had you?" he asked, trying to put the question as indifferently as possible.

"I had; but I was only watching before."

"How often?"

"I don't see what right——" He broke off without finishing his sentence, and Beach finished it for him.

"What right I have to ask? . . . None, of course:—except that I know him better than you do."

"You think so, at any rate."

"I don't only think so: it's not a matter of opinion at all. If you knew him you wouldn't go near him:—he's all wrong. You seem to think I'm prejudiced, or spiteful, or something; but you haven't heard me running down other chaps, have you?"

"And what about Oulton?—doesn't *he* know him?" asked Evan, ironically.

"He ought to. But you've only Cantillon's word about Oulton; and at any rate Oulton isn't you. You're younger than he is, and a great deal younger than Cantillon. Good Lord!" he broke out, "you surely don't think I'm the sort of hound that would say things like this about a chap if I didn't know they were true?"

"I'm younger than you if it comes to that," answered Evan.

"I know you are."

"And younger than Dorset. Cantillon says *he* knows his way about all right."

Beach looked at the ground. He did not speak for a little. Then he said slowly, "I say—I wish you wouldn't talk like that—it sounds rotten."

Evan suddenly felt ashamed, but he would not own to it, and they walked on for a long time without uttering another word.

It was their first approach to a quarrel, and it was not exactly a quarrel. To Beach it was somehow almost worse than one, because it seemed, on Evan's part, so deliberate. He could not understand why Evan should have spoken to him as he had spoken. Perhaps he had not really said very much; but Beach was conscious, not at all clearly, but very painfully, of a certain hardness behind his words; of a kind of spiritual antagonism; of a coldness and indifference. It hurt him and surprised him; just as, though in a far lesser degree, it had hurt him that morning to find that Evan had gone on to school without him. He hung his head. He tried to believe that he himself had been a good deal to blame.

It would have relieved him immensely to have been able to think so. But though he might tell himself that it was his own fault, he could not feel it; and though he might tell himself that it meant nothing, he could not feel that either.

He did not notice the people they were passing, or anything that was going on around him. He kept his head down as if he were carefully studying the white, dusty pavement—as if he were picking out the lines between the flagstones, perhaps, to walk on or to avoid, as he had sometimes done when he was a very few years younger. A watering-cart rattled by, sending out a strong fan-shaped shower behind it that glittered in the hot sunshine. Beach, on the edge of the pavement, was splashed from his knees down, but he took no notice.

And it was Evan who eventually broke the silence.

"I'm not particularly keen on Cantillon," he muttered.

Beach looked up. They were only a few yards from the Park gate now, and he slackened his pace. There were a lot of things he wanted to say, but before he could get out a single word he saw Janet Oulton.

## X

EVAN saw her, too (she must have been waiting just inside the gates), a girl of nineteen or twenty, with very dark hair and blue eyes, and a singularly animated expression. The moment she caught sight of Beach she pounced upon him, not even waiting for him to bid good-bye to his companion, whom she surveyed swiftly, with a single keen glance that absorbed him; took him in, as it were, all at once—a full-length, instantaneous portrait, from the crown of his straw hat to the soles of his shoes.

“Well, I must say I think it would have been more polite if you had come on a tram,” she began immediately. “That policeman over there has had his eye on me for the last ten minutes, and I’m quite sure in another five I should have been arrested as a political conspirator or something—beautiful, of course, but highly dangerous.”

Beach apologised. “I didn’t think you would be here so soon—especially since you seemed so certain I’d be kept in.”

“Did you get an imposition instead? Well, you see I *was* here—even sooner, as it turns out. But we must move on, or the policeman will think you’re an accomplice. We’ll go and sit down under a tree.”

Janet Oulton, the cousin of Miles and Tom, was brilliantly pretty. She was herself perfectly conscious of the fact, making unscrupulous use of the advantage it gave her in all her dealings with the male sex. With women she was less successful. They were apt—when they were elderly—to call her vivacity obstreperousness. And with her Aunt Elinor, the mother of Miles and Tom, she was not successful at all; which was unfortunate, seeing that they all lived together. That is to say, it was unfortunate for Mrs Oulton; because when one lived with Janet one was very much aware of it—particularly if one had rather “rocky” nerves. The “rocky nerves” were, of course, Mrs Oulton’s, and the too explicit phrase was Janet’s own. Mrs Oulton had overheard it. She was a woman who liked sympathy, and Janet’s voice had on this occasion sounded even less sympathetic than her words. Long before that, however, Aunt Elinor had come to regard her niece with a profound, though silent, disapproval.

As soon as they had chosen their bench, in a secluded grove far from nurses and ancient pensioners (or at any rate as far as was possible), Janet all at once became more serious than Beach had ever beheld her. What was still more wonderful was that she appeared even to have grown doubtful and irresolute, so that he gazed at her in some trepidation as to the nature of the confidence she was about to spring upon him.

He gazed, but his gazing did not help him

much. All that he could see was one delicate ear, and the soft curve of her cheek, as she sat with her profile turned to him, and her face shadowed by a dark, broad-brimmed hat. Presently, while he watched her in silence, she leaned forward and began to dig holes in the ground with the point of her umbrella. When she did look up, however, she faced him boldly, and he was conscious that her dark blue eyes looked darker than usual, and that she was quite a different Janet from the old one—one that he, somehow, liked better—very much better—though till now he had not known of her existence.

"I want to speak to you, Beach, about a matter that is extremely private. I knew you would be furious when Tom gave you my note; and I daresay you think even now that I dragged you out here for nothing—but I didn't."

She waited, and as Beach remained silent, added almost petulantly, "Why don't you say something?"

"What do you want me to say?" Beach asked, ingenuously.

Janet laughed. "Oh, anything—anything encouraging."

She looked into his boyish, honest face—a little stupid, perhaps—no, not stupid, but perplexed; perplexed and very kind. She felt quite sure that at any rate it would do no harm to tell him; but still she paused.

"Fire away!" Beach said at last. "I'm listening."

"Yes; but I want you to do more than listen.

I want you to help me. . . . It's about Miles."

"Miles!" he repeated; and she noticed that the name came from his lips with a total lack of enthusiasm. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Now, Beach, you must hear what I've got to say; and I'm going to be perfectly frank with you. . . . By the way, who was that nice-looking little boy you were walking home with?"

Beach for some reason found himself colouring. "His name is Hayes," he answered.

"Well, he's very good-looking. But I think he should be made to play football, or something."

"It's rather unusual to play football in summer," answered Beach, coldly.

Janet gave him a quick, sidelong glance; then she smiled. "I was only speaking figuratively. But I saw him the other day when I was coming home from golf, and he had a cane in his hand, and gloves. If it hadn't been such a public place I should have boxed his ears. Do you like him very much?"

Beach did not look pleased. "Oh, he's all right," he said, falling back on his customary form of approbation.

"However, we're not getting on with what I brought you out here to discuss—though, perhaps, it all bears indirectly upon it." Again her glance had a certain swift interrogative quality. "Have you dropped Miles?"

Beach stared. "Good Lord, no! Why should I drop him?"

Janet returned his gaze before beginning

once more to dab at the ground with her umbrella.

"No, I don't think you can have," she admitted at last. "I mean, I don't think you'd ever drop anybody. But certainly you're not such friends with him as you used to be."

"It's not my fault," answered Beach, conscious, though he did not say so, that the friendship on his side had never at any time been remarkably close. "At least, if I've done anything, I did it without knowing about it. I don't even now know what it is."

"You admit, all the same, that you're not so friendly as you used to be? You're not pals any more?" Her manner was very coaxing and charming.

Beach hesitated. Then he said frankly, "No; I don't suppose we are."

"Do you know anything about an odious boy called Cantillon?" Janet asked next, after just the slightest pause. "A long, lanky boy who wears a ring, and oils his hair, and blinks his eyes, and has a voice like a cat purring—a boy about seventeen."

"Well, you seem to have got him all right," Beach confessed with astonishment.

"Yes; I happen to be rather interested in him."

"Interested in Cantillon?"

"Yes, I want to find out if he's really as horrid as I think he is. I know men and boys are always supposed to stand up for one another—to women at least—but I want you to tell me the truth, because this boy has become friends with Miles,"

"Of course he's a rottér," said Beach, simply. "You're quite right there. But how on earth did you get to know about him?"

"He was introduced to me," Janet replied.

Beach gasped. "Do you mean to say Miles introduced that—that chap to you?" he asked, incredulously.

Janet nodded. "It came about in this way. I don't think Miles wanted to introduce him, but I was in Simpson's, waiting for Florrie Stewart (we had arranged to have tea there), when these two came in, and sat down at my table before Miles recognised me. At least, I don't think he recognised me, because the place was rather crowded, and I happened to be looking the other way when they came in. . . . In any case, all the other tables were occupied."

"And you talked to him—to Cantillon?"

"You mustn't be silly, Beach, dear. Of course, I *had* to talk to him. I didn't talk very much, and neither did he. In fact, he seemed extremely nervous."

"He was never very nervous when *I* saw him," said Beach, morosely. "Except when he thought he might get into a row."

"Now, don't be cross. Naturally, he's not nervous with other boys; and even with me he got better after a while, though I don't think he looked me in the face once the whole time. But that doesn't matter. It wasn't that that made me take a dislike to him. I don't know what it was, for he seemed to try to be as pleasant as possible. He's been up at

the house with Miles—twice, I think—in the afternoon; and I know from Tom that they see a good deal of each other. Tom doesn't like him either, and somehow I don't think he'll do Miles any good."

"He couldn't do anybody any good," answered Beach, bluntly. "He doesn't want to do them any good."

"Why?"

"Oh, how do I know? I suppose because it's his nature. He's got one fellow sacked already—at least, they were always running about together; and then, in the end, when the row came, Cantillon managed to sneak out of it, as usual. He's as cunning as—as—anything."

"What was the boy expelled for?"

"Oh, I don't know: it was all rather rotten, and stupid. He was really only a kid, this other chap, Waterlow—a kid, that is, compared with Cantillon. . . . Palmer Dorset could tell you. It was he who told me. . . . What Cantillon needs is a jolly good kicking."

"Why don't you give it to him? You could, couldn't you?"

Beach sucked in his lips. "I should hope so. . . . He knows it, too. But he's the sort of chap who'll eat out of your hand."

"Do you think Miles knows about him?"

Beach hesitated and looked down, while Janet watched him closely.

"Well?" she asked.

"He can't, or he wouldn't go with him," Beach mumbled. "I daresay Cantillon is pleasant

enough," he went on, rather helplessly. "He seems to be able to get a sort of influence over some fellows; and of course he's clever and high up in the school."

"But surely he's not popular?"

"No; but he's not barred in the way he should be, except by one or two."

"By you and Palmer Dorset?"

"By me and Weston and Doherty, and also by two or three of the biggest fellows—fellows of his own age."

"Not by Palmer Dorset, then?"

"I don't know about Dorset—but at any rate he doesn't count."

"Why doesn't he count? How do you mean?" Janet asked, curiously.

Beach himself was puzzled to say. "Well, he's always been like that. Things don't fizz on Dorset. He'd pal with Cantillon—or with the devil for that matter—if it suited him." He paused a moment. "I don't know whether you see what I mean?"

"I think I do." Janet was wondering, in fact, whether she wouldn't have done better to have invited Palmer Dorset to the present consultation.

"And he'd curl him up like that"—Beach made an expressive movement with his hand—"if he ever got in his way. He's not like Waterlow . . . nor like Miles."

"And it's Miles we have to think of," Janet remembered.

Beach looked at her. He never could have

believed beforehand that she would have taken so much trouble about Miles, and he didn't even yet see where she wanted to come out.

"You see, I can't tell Aunt Elinor," Janet explained, as if guessing more or less what was passing in his mind. "She'd only get in a state, and that would do no good. Besides, she'd think I'd invented it all. She'd probably *like* Cantillon herself—she likes anybody who doesn't make a noise. . . . And I can't tell papa, because he's so frightfully strict with Miles." Her voice grew suddenly more confidential, and her dark blue eyes rested on those of the boy beside her. "Papa doesn't like Miles, Beach. You see, I'm telling you everything! And Miles is afraid of papa."

"If he's afraid——"

"You think he would do what papa told him? I don't think he would. I think it would make him do just the opposite, though of course he'd take good care not to be found out. And—I can't explain—but you'll just have to believe me when I say that that way is impossible."

"Why don't you speak to him yourself, then?" Beach asked, rather at a loss.

"How can I? After all, I don't really *know* anything."

She waited, and Beach had an inkling of what her silence signified. "I don't see what *I* can do," he muttered, indistinctly.

"But this isn't all," Janet went on softly. "I know Miles isn't working properly; and I know there must be something the matter from the

way he looks. That is my real reason, though I didn't mention it. You said yourself that he wasn't like you, or like Palmer Dorset. Things affect him more. . . . And—he asked me this morning to lend him some money. Of course, that mayn't mean anything; but, somehow, when it all comes together—— I know he sold his collection of stamps only a week or two ago. He had a quite good collection, and if papa found out that he had sold it he'd be furious, for he gives Miles plenty of pocket money.' He'd probably find out other things, too, at the same time. There must be other things, Beach, or what does he want the money for?"

"Well, I'll go and see him," said Beach, dolefully, "if you want me to. I'll go to-night."

"Beach, you're a darling. I'll give you a kiss for saying that." And Janet, leaning to him, was as good as her word.

"I say, look out!" cried Beach. "There's some one watching you."

Janet looked up to encounter the fixed stare of a nurse-maid, who had just come round the corner, wheeling a perambulator, and with two small children dragging at her skirts. She sprang to her feet: she was once more as Beach had always known her. "Now that I've hopelessly compromised myself I must fly!" she said gaily. "Gracious! here's the policeman too; the one who was watching me at the gate! She'll tell him, for he's evidently an *attaché*. Do you think she'd stop staring if I put out

my tongue at her? I'll do it if she goes on much longer. Get up, Beach. We must go. I promised to meet Florrie at Gibson's corner at five, and I haven't even had tea yet. I suppose I'll have to do without. You wouldn't like to come with us, would you, and take charge of two forlorn females? I won't press you, because Florrie's going to buy a hat, but you can come if you like."

## XI

BEACH apparently did not like ; but he accompanied Janet as far as the Park gate, and waited with her there till her tram arrived. From the top she gaily waved her hand to him, and, though scarcely approving of this public demonstration, he smiled and waved his straw hat in return.

He stood on the footpath till the tram was out of sight, and then began to walk slowly back across Ormeau Bridge. In the middle of the bridge he paused, and, leaning over the parapet, watched a long line of barges, loaded high with wood, passing underneath. The river here, and in this garish light, looked foul and slimy ; the sun glittered on the oily, opalescent water ; and the ebbing tide had left a dark strip of mud visible below either bank.

Beach watched the barges till they disappeared round the loop of the stream, but it was not because he was in the least interested in them—he saw barges every day of his life. He watched the sunlight glistening on the pallid water, while he thought of the two extremely distasteful tasks which lay before him, and of how foolish he had been to allow Janet to beguile him. One of these tasks, it is true—that one in which Janet was so interested—could wait till after dinner ;

but the other he would have to get through with before he went home, and the sooner the better. . . . Yet still he lingered. . . . After all, was it really necessary? If he let it go he knew he should never hear of it again. The temptation simply to accept his luck, as he knew it would be called by every boy of his acquaintance, was very strong: only he had this queer prejudice against lying (even to a master)—this prejudice that was really an eccentricity, like his feeling for animals, though he hated to seem eccentric, wanted to seem just the same as other people. . . .

Five minutes' walk brought him to the street in which Mr Ledgerwood lived, and a boy with a basket and a piece of chewing gum pointed out to him the particular house—number 28—the house with window-boxes and green curtains, just opposite the lamp-post. Mr Ledgerwood was at home.

Mr Ledgerwood, indeed, after taking detention, had arrived on his bicycle only a few minutes before, and was now bolting a hasty meal preparatory to rushing off to the tennis club. In spite of the excitement and indignant protests of a small fox-terrier, Beach was shown into his study, where he sat down to wait. The room—doubtless because of what lay ahead of him—seemed to the boy about as cheerful as a dentist's parlour, and he glanced round it with that restless superficial attention which such parlours attract. The principal item of furniture was a table covered with a red, ink-stained cloth,

and strewn with books and papers. Two or three photographs of college groups hung on the walls, together with some coloured sporting prints, and a large oak-framed portrait of a man with dark, mad, sleepless eyes, and a heavy moustache. The mantelpiece was littered with pipes, tobacco-boxes, and more books.

Beach, watched suspiciously by the terrier, presently got up and searched for Mr Ledgerwood in the college groups. The search was conducted more or less subconsciously, for he was thinking all the time of his approaching interview. He had just come to a pause before the third group, when the schoolmaster entered.

At the sound of the opening door the boy turned round, blushing deeply. He was about to take a step forward, but something in the aspect of Mr Ledgerwood, who was in flannels, checked this impulse, and he stood still. Mr Ledgerwood gave him a curt nod.

"Well, Traill, what is it?"

The young schoolmaster looked neither surprised nor pleased to see him, nor did he ask him to sit down. The fact was that, thanks to the exasperating conduct of Palmer Dorset and Weston at detention, he was already late for an appointment made the day before, and Beach, had he desired to do so, could not have hit upon a less opportune hour for his visit. Mr Ledgerwood, in a fever to be gone, was even inclined to give him credit for such a desire.

The boy's hands closed over the back of a

chair, and he looked down; but Mr Ledgerwood was not interested in these signs of agitation. He was too preoccupied with the thought that somebody else would very likely have taken his place in the set arranged yesterday to pay much attention to anything else. He frowned impatiently at Beach's slowness.

"I came to apologise, sir. I told you a lie this morning. I hadn't a book, but I had the translation written out on paper."

His nervousness lent an abruptness, a brusqueness, to this speech, which perhaps created a wrong impression upon Mr Ledgerwood's mind, ripe at that moment to receive wrong impressions. Certainly he looked at Beach very coldly and sceptically when, his apology given, the boy raised his eyes and waited. Mr Ledgerwood was young (not very far on in the twenties), and he had adopted a cynical attitude towards life. He was reading for the bar, and regarded schoolmastering as but a brief interlude in a career which he intended to make as brilliant as possible. The human boy was the last animal in the world he was inclined to view sentimentally. As he had that very morning remarked to a slightly older colleague, he had little faith in Wordsworth's "priest of nature" theory, and still less in the "trailing clouds of glory." The average boy was an indecent little beast, cunning, plausible, callous, with the temperament of a monkey, aggravated by a rudimentary sense of humour, and hardly modified by an antique and threadbare code of ethics. There was very little "sweetness"

to be discovered there, and absolutely no "light."

He looked Beach in the eyes. He knew how most men would have fallen straightway into the trap—a booby-trap baited disgustingly with the rankest sentiment. This confession of Traill's he in fact believed to have been suggested by some school story recently devoured, and Traill himself, at that moment, to be experiencing all the romantic joy of an imagined identity with its hero.

These thoughts were reflected in his keen, strong, if not quite agreeable face, and though Beach could not read them there very accurately, he read enough to make him wish he had stayed away.

"What was it made you think of coming to tell me?" Mr Ledgerwood asked unsympathetically. "I should have thought it would have been easier to have done so at the time—and more natural."

Beach made no reply, and Mr Ledgerwood went on. "Why did you tell me this lie?"

The word was the word Beach had himself used: it was of course the right word: nevertheless he winced at the repetition of it. "I don't know, sir."

Mr Ledgerwood glanced, as if appreciating the contrast, from the flushed schoolboy confronting him to the portrait which hung between the college groups directly over Beach's head. Traill, assuredly, would never be an "overman."

Mr Ledgerwood was rather proud of that portrait. He liked people to look at it, liked

them also to look at the books scattered unostentatiously along the mantelpiece. The whole room—from the pipes and sporting prints to the books and the photograph of Nietzsche—seemed to him expressive of a happy combination of virility and intellect, expressive of a personality that was distinctly his own.

He came back to the examination of Beach Traill feeling rather more benevolent. "You don't know! Surely the reason isn't so subtle as all that! Don't you think an idea of escaping punishment may have had a great deal to do with it?"

Beach was silent.

"Well, of course, now you've owned up I suppose the stereotyped thing for me to do is to say that that ends the matter, and possibly to express my appreciation of your conduct in coming to tell me." His words were accompanied by that downward twitch of the corners of his mouth which somehow expressed his whole relation to his pupils.

Still Beach remained dumb, and apparently insensible. Mr Ledgerwood suddenly felt irritated. "I ought to tell you that I believed you this morning. I don't know why one is accustomed to associate truth and honesty with your particular type of face and grade of intelligence, but somehow one does. The association is evidently fallacious:—but that aspect of the case will scarcely interest you. . . . Tell me, does a great deal of this sort of thing go on?"

All Beach's nervousness had disappeared. "What sort of thing, sir?" he asked.

"This cribbing, or cogging, or whatever you like to call it?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

Mr Ledgerwood noticed the change in his tone, and it displeased him.

"You're abominably idle, you know," he said half contemptuously. "I suppose anything which even remotely borders on an intellectual effort is distasteful to you? Tell me, do you ever play chess or bridge?"

"I've played bridge, sir:—not very often."

"Well, I shouldn't like to have you for a partner. You'd rather have animal grab, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, sir," Beach replied.

He had flushed again, however, and Mr Ledgerwood possibly felt a tardy pang of compunction.

"Well, we'll allow the matter to drop," he went on more civilly. He might have gone even further, and said something positively kindly, had he not felt that this would be a little ridiculous after the attitude he had taken up.

"Then I may go, sir?" Beach took a step to the door, and Mr Ledgerwood followed him out into the hall. He there made a remark about the weather, with a more or less conciliatory intention (after all, he wouldn't be so very late, and one of the other men might have been kept too), but the boy was already in the street.

Mr Ledgerwood watched him walk quickly away before he returned to his study for his

pipe. The fox-terrier, who during his brief absence had been inspecting something attractive in the grate, jumped up at him, leaving the marks of two dirty paws on his white trousers. Mr Ledgerwood swore, but not altogether at the dog.

## XII

BEACH had no faith in the wisdom of Janet's plan : on the contrary, he felt certain that any interference on his part would only make matters worse : but what was he to do ?

The evening sun dropped slowly down behind the trees, and a golden brightness in the sky was reflected like drowned gold in the glittering lake. As he skirted the water's edge, his feet sinking noiselessly in dark green moss, he almost trod on a young bat. He lifted it and placed it carefully in the hollow of a tree, but it began to crawl up one of the thick gnarled boughs, helplessly and aimlessly, and he was struck by the contrast between this feeble, sluggish life, and the passionate exuberant life of the birds shrilling in the topmost branches. Yet he felt no aversion from the bat ; he liked it ; it was all right in its own way. He began to form a plan of turning the place into a huge menagerie ; yet not so much a menagerie as a home, a refuge, a sort of holiday ground for all kinds of animals. He often saw old worn-out donkeys and horses in the streets. When he had money of his own, as he supposed he would have when he came of age, he would buy up all these and turn them loose in here to pass their last years pleasantly. There was nothing he would like

to do so much as this. He thought he might begin even now, in a small way. Of course he would be laughed at; objections would be made; but still, if he persisted, he could get his own way in the end. . . .

Then the much less pleasant thought of his promise to Janet put an abrupt termination to these plans. . . . What could he say to Miles? Somehow, while Janet had been talking to him, he had not fully realised the absurdity of the thing, but he realised it now. He would simply make an ass of himself. He hadn't the least right to interfere with Miles, much less to start preaching to him. Miles almost certainly would lose his temper: there might even be a row.

He paused for a moment when he reached the back lodge: then he opened the door in the wall, and came face to face with Evan.

Beach stood still. He stood on the threshold, with the quiet evening woods behind him, and Evan in front of him, framed in the old stone doorway, looking extraordinarily handsome, his school cap at the back of his head, a smile lighting up his face. His smile deepened. It was always curiously attractive, but just now it seemed to express him, and he himself seemed to express the very spirit of grace and youth, of an unspoiled beauty, clean and flawless—a beauty that from its very proportion and harmony gained a kind of spiritual quality. “You’re going out?” he said lightly.

Beach hesitated, his lips forming a negative

that remained soundless, yet very eloquent, while Evan watched him carelessly.

"Yes ; I have to. I have to go to the Oultons. I promised. . . ."

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming up?" he added impulsively. "If I had known you were coming I needn't have made this other arrangement. I asked you in school this morning, and you said you were going to work."

"Well, I'll go as far as the Oultons with you."

The walk was a short one. Beach wondered if Evan would turn off at the end of the avenue, or if he would come with him as far as the Oultons' gate. Evan stopped at the end of the avenue.

Beach hesitated again. "You wouldn't like to wait . . . ? Of course, I don't know how long I'll be exactly, but I'll hurry as much as I can. . . ."

"Oh, it doesn't matter. I'll just go on home."

He let him go. He had indeed no choice in the matter ; but, at the same time, he was conscious of a greater distaste than ever for the task he had undertaken. What had it to do with him? What had any of the Oultons to do with him? At that moment he disliked them all, felt as if they had done him an injury.

Over the smooth top of the hedge he saw Miles in the garden alone. He pushed open the gate and entered, discovering, as he did so, that he had no excuse to offer for his visit. Even in the days when he had been on quite good terms with Miles he had gone very seldom to the house,—as

seldom as possible,—and now, the first greeting over,—a greeting rather cold on Miles's side, and on Beach's awkward and self-conscious,—he stood as if stricken dumb. Miles, he saw at once, would do nothing to help him out:—and he had a sense of having been tricked, tricked by Janet's cajoleries, into the playing of a rôle he had neither the right nor the desire nor the ability to assume.

“Going to wait for the match to-morrow?” he asked feebly.

“I don't know. Are you?”

“Yes.”

Miles's face cleared. Beach was surprised by the sudden and unexpected alteration in it,—surprised and immensely relieved,—too relieved even to wonder what had caused the change. His constraint dropped from him as by magic. “I told young Hayes I would stay and watch it. He's going to watch it too. I may see you there.”

The blood suddenly rose under Miles's dark skin, and he stooped quickly and pulled some weeds from the mignonette border. “I don't expect you will. It's rather a bore looking at other chaps playing games. . . . Besides, I don't know what I'll be doing. Cantillon said something about keeping to-morrow afternoon free.”

Beach was aware that the atmosphere had again grown cold, grown cold as rapidly as it had thawed; but here, at any rate, was his opportunity, come sooner than he could have hoped for, and he tried to make the best of it. “That's just what I wanted to speak to you

about," he began indistinctly. "I can't understand why you have anything to do with that fellow. If he's nothing else, he's the most rotten——"

He stopped abruptly, warned by the expression on Miles's face. Miles was not going to take it well.

"What do you mean by 'you wanted to speak to me about it'?" he asked slowly. "Who the blazes do you imagine you are? What business——"

His voice died away, and Beach, who had been facing him rather miserably, swung round, following the direction of his glance. Both boys stood perfectly still. A tall, erect, rather thin figure, wearing very light-coloured clothes, and smoking a cigar, had come out from the house. It was the figure of a man not yet past middle-age—probably somewhere on the verge of fifty. He was clean-shaven, distinguished-looking, with strongly-marked aquiline features; and his hair, of a silvery grey, was slightly thinned at the temples. His cold, almost colourless eyes rested on Miles and Beach, but he did not draw any nearer, though he nodded to Beach, with the ghost of a smile, that was from the thin-lipped mouth only, and Beach lifted his cap. The thing was amazing, though he did not realise this till afterwards. Why should everything have ended just then? What had happened? For there was nothing really there but a house, a garden in the evening light, and a tall cool grey figure standing near the porch, smoking and watching

them. The impression had come to him—whatever it was—from Miles himself. It was Miles's attitude that had infected him, that had awakened in his mind an echo of certain words spoken by Janet only that afternoon:—"I can't explain—you'll just have to believe me when I say that that way is impossible."

The reply he might have made a minute or two earlier was certainly not the reply which now rose to his lips—four words that would have sounded to an eavesdropper oddly irrelevant:

"What does he want?"

He looked into Miles's eyes, which were instantly averted as if to hide something Beach might read there. All Miles's anger seemed suddenly to have died down, like a spent fire, to a grey brooding sullenness. He did not answer; and Beach, turning away, made no further attempt to keep his promise to Janet. What good, indeed, in going further? In broaching the subject at all he had acted against his better judgment, and he had a strong suspicion now that, whatever Miles's relation with Cantillon might have been in the past, from this on—for a little at any rate—it would be one of boon companionship. With a strange feeling of depression—a depression which nothing in this so brief scene appeared really to account for—he walked towards the gate.

"Well, I'll have to go back. I haven't done a stroke of work yet."

He spoke, he felt indeed, as if their interview

had lasted for a long time. In reality it had occupied hardly five minutes.

Miles accompanied him to the gate, but evidently only for his uncle's benefit, as he did not speak another word. They parted with a slight nod; Beach, as he walked on, repressing a strong inclination to look back over his shoulder and see if Mr Oulton had joined his nephew.

### XIII

ON arriving home the first thing he noticed was Palmer's bicycle propped up against the side of the porch, and he ran straight on upstairs to his own room.

He found Palmer there, curled up in the window-seat, where he had collected all the cushions he could lay his hands on. His back was towards the open window; he was reading a novel. Over the top of the book he looked at Beach as the latter came in, slamming the door behind him with a vigorous kick.

Beach glanced round at the dismantled chairs, and then again at Palmer. "Why don't you make yourself comfortable?" he asked. "You might have got the pillows from my bedroom as well. Have you been here long?"

"About ten minutes," said Palmer. "Nobody knew where you had gone to, so I decided to wait."

"Well, it's only a chance that I'm back so soon. I thought I'd be out for at least an hour or two."

"And I thought I'd find you working. That's why I came up:—I wanted to see it. . . . It's rather curious, but I've never found you working yet, and I've come here at all hours of the day and night. . . . When *do* you work, if it's a fair question?"

"I work all the time. At any rate, it's not my fault. People are always shoving things on to me—things they don't want to do themselves. . . . And I'm going to work now. I'm sorry; but it's absolutely necessary: I've a frightful lot to do."

"Well, do it; I'd love to watch you."

"But I'm not joking," said Beach, seriously. "I've got five hundred lines to write, as well as my ordinary work: and if you're here you know how much I'll get through."

"You want me to go, then? What a rotten thing to say!"

"I don't *want* you to: it's not a matter of choice. I'd much rather talk to you than write lines, but the lines must be written."

"Who are they for? What have you been up to?" Palmer asked sceptically.

"They're for Ledgy."

"For Ledgy? Five hundred? When did he give them to you?"

"He didn't exactly give them to me."

Palmer's forehead wrinkled. "I'm afraid I don't quite understand. You haven't just developed a hobby for writing lines, have you?"

Beach took a pile of ruled foolscap from a drawer and sat down at the table. "I went round to apologise to him this afternoon," he said, opening his Virgil, and propping it up before him against a little heap of other books.

"To apologise?"

Beach nodded. "You remember when he put me on to construe this morning. . . .? Well, I

was reading it off a paper, and of course he spotted me."

"Did he? I thought that that was just what he didn't do," said Palmer.

Beach got up and filled the ink-bottle from a stone jar. Then he sat down once more and dipped his pen. "He asked me if I had a translation, and I said I hadn't. It was true, at least it was partly true, because Evan had just taken it away. . . . All the same it was a damned lie. So I went round this afternoon and told him."

Palmer whistled softly. "And he gave you five hundred lines! That was coming it a bit thick, even for Ledgy!"

"He didn't give me any lines," said Beach, stolidly.

"Then——"

"He was rather rotten about the whole business. He seemed to think I had counted on his letting me off."

"I suppose you did, more or less," said Palmer, mildly.

Beach looked angry. "I didn't. I daresay it's the kind of thing you would do; but I never thought about it. And I'm going to write the lines."

"But why five hundred?" Palmer still failed to see the point. "Surely fifty would be enough. It's all very well being generous, but there's no need to be lavish." He looked at Beach with a certain amusement; then he got up. "Well, I may as well help you now I'm here. I suppose

Ledgy would be sure to spot my writing, but I'll read out the stuff and you can write."

Beach shook his head. "That wouldn't do. I must do the whole thing myself. Thanks for offering."

"Oh, don't mention it," murmured Palmer, languidly. He walked over to the shelf, and put away his novel. "All the same, if it was me, I'd see him damned first."

"There's something else, too, I want to talk to you about," said Beach, "but I haven't time now. . . . Are you going to wait after school to-morrow for the match?"

"I expect so. I'll wait to see what young Weston does anyway. I daresay that will be enough."

"Well, I'll tell you then."

This was Palmer's dismissal, but its effect was not immediate.

"Do you know that there's a case of diphtheria;—young Smith?"

Beach shook his head without looking up. He had already begun to write—a big, sprawling, untidy hand, quite unformed.

"I just heard this afternoon," Palmer went on. "I think it's only a very mild attack, but that's not the point. The point is that it may have an effect on us:—I mean, if there should be any more cases. They'd probably close the school till after summer. At least, so my pater says."

Beach, suddenly interested, stopped writing. "I wonder if they would?" he queried thought-

fully. "It would be almost worth while having another case—another very mild case."

"Pity it isn't measles: then we might arrange it," said Palmer, moving at last to the door. "You can bring out a ripping rash by hitting yourself on the body with a hair-brush. . . . I've done it. . . . But I mustn't keep you from your lines."

"Wait just a jiff." He still held his pen in his hand, while he sat staring at the opposite wall for perhaps thirty seconds. Then, without turning round, he delivered himself of a sufficiently remarkable speech.

"I say, Dorset, if it were necessary—I mean, if it would be for the good of the school, and all that—do you think you could get Cantillon sacked?"

A hardly perceptible smile flickered across Palmer's broad face, and he returned straightway to his cushions. Dropping down there, and stretching out his legs, he leaned his head back, while he eyed Beach speculatively in silence. But Beach continued to stare fixedly at the wall.

"Did you ever hear of one chap getting another sacked?" Palmer asked at last. "It's against all the rules. Schoolboy honour—you know . . . ! I remember reading a book called 'Schoolboy Honour' when I was a kid, and I'm quite sure nobody behaved like that in it. The bad boy used to smoke cigarettes, like you, and somebody found a crib, but—— It's just the sort of book you'd be likely to have, by the way."

He raised himself a little so that he could look beyond Beach at the book-shelf.

Beach laid down his pen. "Well, I haven't got it," he answered. "And this is serious. . . . Could you do it?"

"I don't know. I should think it very likely."

"Of course, it mayn't come to that. . . . I hope it won't. . . . But if it did, you're the only chap——"

"Sufficiently dishonourable, do you mean?"

"No :—but—— Perhaps I'd better tell you the whole yarn now. To-morrow Evan will be there, and we can't talk about it before him."

Palmer disguised his satisfaction under an air of indifference. "Why not? I'm sure he'd be interested."

"That doesn't matter : he's only a kid. . . . At any rate, I won't have much time to-morrow. I'll have to get these rotten lines finished, and I can't possibly do them all to-night."

Palmer was silent a moment. "You know, you're a wonderful chap!" he remarked a little cynically. "I don't want to offend you; only, before we go any further, haven't you got rather an exalted opinion of young Hayes?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing more than that I shouldn't idealise him too much. It's not a good plan."

"I don't idealise him," said Beach, simply.

"No, of course not: but I'd be careful not to begin. It would hardly be fair to him, you know, and it might lead to disappointment."

Beach received this advice with perfect unconcern. "Don't you like him?" he asked.

"That's not the point. I quite see he's going to be there, and I have already accepted him."

"Yes; I noticed that this afternoon."

"You mean, when he asked me to go for a walk?"

Beach got up, and, crossing to the window, pressed his forehead against the glass. "The kid only wanted to be decent," he said.

"And I only wanted to be decent. My method's really the decentest in the long run. There's no use in taking him up violently at the beginning only to let him down with a rush. There's plenty of time, you know. We'll see how he gets along under your tuition. And at any rate you must see, or at least you ought to see, that he isn't my sort."

"Why?" Beach persisted, still staring out into the garden. "I should have thought you'd be rather keen on him. You always profess to admire cleverness, and he's clever."

"I daresay he is—in a very ordinary way. But he's not as clever as I am. I hope you don't think so, Beach; because you'd be making a bad mistake."

"I don't suppose he is," said Beach, phlegmatically. "But he's as clever as anyone who—who's not a freak."

"Thanks," said Palmer.

"Even granting that he's clever," he went on presently, "I can't see why that should be any particular recommendation in your eyes."

"Can't you? What do you think I like *you* for, then?"

"I supposed it to be largely a matter of personal charm."

Beach hesitated, still keeping his back to the room. "That—that's just what Evan has," he said.

"Teach him to box," Palmer suggested briefly. "It's not a bad test—among others."

"Do you say that because he refused to try last night?"

"Not at all: he only refused to try with me: he knows you wouldn't hit him."

For all answer Beach went to the cupboard where the gloves were kept. He threw one pair to Palmer, and began to clear a space in the middle of the floor by pushing all the furniture against the walls.

"I say, what about your work?" Palmer reminded him, a little taken aback by these sudden and energetic preparations.

"Work be blowed. This is only for five minutes. I must have some exercise. A lot of things have happened to-day to annoy me."

"Oh, well, if you're really anxious for a thumping!"

They took off their jackets and rolled up their shirt sleeves. Beach had a considerable advantage in reach, and some, though not much, in weight; but he was neither so quick nor so cool as his opponent, and they were very evenly matched. Palmer, in fact, was scoring all along, when a right swing on the jaw brought him up heavily

against the table. The ink-bottle, which Beach characteristically had filled to the brim, was overturned, and Palmer, as he sprawled across the table, received most of its contents on his trousers.

He staggered to an upright position, while Beach gazed at him in consternation. His trousers, unfortunately of a light grey flannel, presented a woeful appearance. Palmer himself, his hands still encased in the boxing-gloves, stared down at them more in astonishment than grief. "What a hell of a lot of ink there must have been!" he murmured. "I wish you'd written your five hundred lines first."

The damage indeed looked irreparable. "You'd better get them off as quickly as possible," said Beach, between his apologies, "and I'll take them down to the kitchen and see if anything can be done."

He went into the adjoining room—his bedroom—to get some of his own clothing; while Palmer followed him and began hastily to disrobe.

"I'm wet to the skin. It's come right through the beastly things."

The ink, in fact, was visible in large black splashes on his shirt and on his bare legs, and Beach began to laugh. "You'd better change your shirt too. I don't want *my* bags spoiled."

Palmer proceeded to do so, first washing the ink off his legs. He rolled his trousers into a bundle and flung them through the open door.

"They'll never be any use again. You can

give them to one of the boys in the garden. . . . The shirt I'll keep. I daresay the ink will wash out in time."

Beach, seated on the side of the bed, watched him as he dressed. "I'll say this for you, Dorset:—you've got a jolly good temper. Most chaps would have been a bit annoyed."

"Well, I'm annoyed;—especially as it prevented me from giving you a licking. . . . That's all I get by coming round here:—a revolting and brutal exhibition of hooliganism. . . ." He put the finishing touches to his toilet. "Come on and tell me what you were going to tell me before you started all this rag."

Beach followed him into the other room, and, taking an armchair, while Palmer resumed his seat in the window, told him of what he had heard from Evan, and also about his interview with Janet Oulton. Palmer listened in silence.

"Well, I don't see that you can do anything more," he remarked when the story was ended. "You seem to have got Oulton's back up pretty badly as it is."

"I knew all along what would happen," said Beach, resignedly.

"Of course: any idiot would have known. But girls don't understand things of that sort, though they'd be the last in the world to allow anybody to interfere with *them*."

"Janet's all right though; she's no fool. . . . Her eyes are frightfully bright," he added irrelevantly. "Did you ever notice?"

"You did, apparently. In fact it seems to have

been your main reason for tackling poor old Miles."

"Well, I had to. What else could I do?"

"You could have refused," said Palmer, simply, "or waited till you had consulted me. I think you'd better leave it to me now."

"I'll leave it to you with the greatest of pleasure, so long as you don't mention my name. I don't want Miles to think I've been talking about him;—it wouldn't do."

"You needn't be alarmed. I'm not going to mention any names. Besides, I'm not going to speak to Miles. I shall confine myself to Cantillon."

"He's a pretty bad egg—don't you think?"

"I do. . . . I've had dealings with him before."

"You!"

"Yes."

"And what happened?"

"Nothing happened."

Darkness had crept into the room while they were talking, and Beach, taking out his watch, had to hold it up to the window before he could make out the time.

"Darn it all!" he exclaimed in sudden dismay. "It's nearly ten o'clock, and I haven't done a stroke of my ordinary work yet, let alone those blasted lines."

"What time did you think it was?" asked Palmer, gently. "Half-past seven?"

"No; but I didn't think it was ten. . . . We may as well have supper now:—there's no use

beginning work just to be interrupted. Will you come down?"

Palmer yawned. "Tell them to send it up," he said. "If you get out your books I'll help you with your Latin prose."

"There's a lot of beastly algebra," said Beach, rising to ring the bell.

"Well, trot it out and we'll make a start."

Beach had turned on the light, and he now drew the table again into the middle of the room. "It's all right for you, but I don't know a thing about it. I say, that ink's made an infernal mess on the carpet! We should have cleaned it up at once. I wonder if it'll wash out."

"Some of it, probably. We'll do the algebra first."

They sat down together at the table and began to work. Supper was brought in, but Palmer, once started, was difficult to stop. He seemed perfectly able to combine the solving of equations with the rapid consumption of sandwiches, but Beach liked to do one thing at a time.

"I'm sorry I'm so horribly stupid," he apologised, as the red-haired boy, with his mouth full of cake, went over for the third time an explanation which Beach still failed to grasp. "It's no good:—or rather I'm no good." He sat staring disconsolately at the paper before him, while Palmer, who throughout the lesson had exhibited an imperturbable patience, squirted some lemon soda into a glass.

"Oh, rot! Algebra's not your strong point,—that's all. Nobody's much good at things they

don't like. I happen to like maths, and that's why I'm tolerable at them."

"It isn't that at all," said Beach, despondently. "Other people when they're no use at maths are good at classics; but I'm just as rotten at one as the other."

Palmer laughed. "You'd be all right if you'd only buck up a bit. . . . We'd better get started to the classics now, all the same, if you're going to finish before daybreak."

"I'll do the classics myself," Beach said gloomily. "I'm not going to keep you here mucking over this stuff for ever. It isn't fair. It must be frightfully late as it is."

Palmer looked at his watch. "Moses! . . . I tell you what. I'll just nip downstairs and ring them up at home to say I'm not coming:—then we'll have plenty of time."

"It's awfully decent of you," Beach demurred feebly.

"Yes, rather! I wouldn't do it only it may be the turning point of your whole life."

He ran downstairs, and presently came back.

"Well?" said Beach.

"It's all right: I told them." He sat down in his chair.

Beach cast a glance of animosity at the books spread out before him—a comprehensive glance, which included even the innocent and helpful Bohn. "Now you're going to stay," he suggested tentatively, "it seems rather a waste to spend the whole time on this filthy stuff."

Palmer looked at him with interest. "What

a lovely slacker you are," he exclaimed in admiration. "You're really 'it,' you know. You seem to like detentions for their own sake."

Beach heaved a deep sigh. "Well, come along."

They had barely started, however, when Mrs Traill opened the door. She paused on the threshold as she saw them apparently so busy. "I didn't know you were still here, Palmer. It's getting rather late. It's after eleven, and I'm just going to bed. I'm afraid the whole house is locked up."

"It's all right, mummy; he's not going home."

"But do they know that? Did you tell your father, Palmer?"

"Yes; I rang up to say not to expect me."

Mrs Traill could never quite accustom herself to the extraordinary liberty Palmer seemed to be allowed by his father. She did not approve of it. She thought it a great pity he had no mother to look after him, and felt very much inclined to mother him herself, though she found it impossible to do so. He seemed hopelessly impervious to all such influences: she had never in her life come across anyone who struck her as quite so independent.

"You won't sit up after half-past eleven, will you, Palmer?" she asked softly. "Why can't you stop now, and do the rest in the morning?"

"We might, of course," Beach agreed. "Mummy dear, you're full of brilliant ideas."

"My brilliant ideas don't seem to be taken very often," 'mummy dear' replied. "If you'd

only begin your lessons at a reasonable hour! I'm sure Palmer had all his done before he came here to-night:—hadn't you, Palmer?"

"Oh, yes, most of them," said Palmer, evasively.

"You shouldn't call it lessons, mummy: you should call it work. Lessons are what you do with a governess."

"And now you're just helping Beach," Mrs Traill went on, ignoring her son's interruption. "It's very good of you, but he really ought to be able to do his own work by this time. If he can't, he must get a tutor."

"A tutor!" Beach exclaimed, colouring a little. "What do I want a tutor for?"

"To do what Palmer is evidently doing. You ought to be ashamed—a big boy like you. Father O'Brien was quite right when he said yesterday that the best thing would be to send you to a boarding school."

"He said that, did he? It's like his cheek. I'll have to talk to him about it."

"Well, something must be done. Each report you get is worse than the last. I wonder they keep you at all, and I expect they won't much longer."

Beach assumed an expression of the deepest injury. "There were a lot of things I *had* to do this afternoon and evening," he explained in aggrieved tones. "They were absolutely necessary. . . . All the same, Dorset, I think we'd really better chuck work now."

He looked at his friend, who was drawing a

pattern on the blotting-paper, but saw no sign of acquiescence in his face.

"You were at the Oultons', weren't you?" said Mrs Traill. "That, I suppose, was one of the necessary things?"

"How did you know? Was Mr Oulton up here?" Beach's voice suddenly altered; his face too; and into his eyes there passed the shadow of a suspicion.

"Yes; he was here for about an hour."

"He didn't bring his fiddle, then. We would have heard it."

"No; Janet was with him. . . . Why, whatever has happened to the carpet?"

Beach had a sudden feeling of relief. "Dorset was chucking the ink about," he cried gaily. "Look at his trousers!" He lifted them from the corner where they had been thrown, and held them up for his mother's inspection.

"Well, I don't see anything to be so pleased about," Mrs Traill said. "That ink will never come out."

"I'm not pleased," said Palmer. "It's only Beach."

"And I'm sure it was Beach who did it. You must have been wrestling, or fighting, or something. Why you can't keep that sort of thing for out of doors, I don't know. I hope they were an old pair, Palmer."

"They weren't: they were very nearly new. I fell against the table and the ink was upset."

"It's too bad. The carpet doesn't matter: that's Beach's own lookout: but I don't know

what your father will say when he finds you've ruined your clothes."

"Oh, he won't say anything. He's really quite a reasonable old boy. Besides, he's always getting his own things in a mess."

Mrs Traill laughed. "Good-night, Palmer. Don't sit up too late, and don't let Beach sit up either."

As the door closed Beach yawned elaborately and stretched himself, but the hint was lost upon Palmer, and a remark to the effect that they had half promised mummy not to work any more met with no greater success.

"Come on: we haven't finished yet. You know very well it's all rot about doing the rest in the morning. Who the blazes is going to get up in the morning? You aren't, and I'm not."

"But I can't possibly do everything to-night. I haven't looked at my English yet."

"Well, we'll work till twelve o'clock anyway. That won't kill you. You can go to bed at eight to-morrow to make up for it."

Beach took out his watch and laid it on the table beside him. At the very second of midnight he sent the books flying with a single sweep of his arm. Pushing back his chair, he sprang to his feet. "That's all, thank the Lord! Nobody can say we didn't do our darndest."

He opened the bedroom door and went in, leaving Palmer to follow or not as he felt inclined.

## XIV

PALMER, in a suit of borrowed pyjamas, leaned out of the open window into a warm moonlit night, windless, curiously alluring, glittering and perfumed, powdered with the dust of romance. Beach, whose eagerness to go to bed was not so apparent now as it had been, was still undressing; but in a minute or two he joined his companion, and they knelt side by side, and leaned over the sill.

"What would you do if you saw a man skulking across the grass there in the shadow of the trees?" Palmer said softly, and with a strange, lingering note in his voice.

"I'd go down and ask him what he was up to. . . . I wish there *was* one, just for the lark."

"No one would come on a night like this. It's too light."

"What would *you* do?"

"I don't know. I might *be* the man, you see:— with a black mask, and a silk rope-ladder, and a plan of the house in my head, and—— It would be ripping camping out there in the woods. If we had a tent we could do it."

"We could get a tent easily enough."

"Will you do it, then? I don't see why we shouldn't."

"I'll get a tent to-morrow. We could ask

Evan. You wouldn't mind having Evan, would you?"

"Evan and Cantillon," said Palmer. "We'll have to make friends with the brute, you know, if we're going to lure him on to destruction."

Beach made no reply, and Palmer, motionless as a statue, still gazed out across the moonlit gardens.

"Why did you say that, Dorset?" Beach asked suddenly. "Of course I know you didn't mean it, because Cantillon's a boarder, and couldn't possibly come even if we did ask him. But why did you say it?"

"Why not, Traill? It's a good thing to put your thoughts into words now and then—you can always judge them better that way."

There was something in his manner which affected Beach disagreeably. He got up and began to move about the room, opening and closing a drawer, bathing his face, fixing something on the dressing-table. Then he knelt down to say his prayers.

Palmer watched him for a few moments before he crossed the room and seated himself on the other side of the bed, hugging his knees.

"Do you say your prayers every night?" he asked abruptly, as Beach got up.

"Except when I forget to."

"Do you think it's any good?"

"I don't know. It can't do much harm."

"That's true. . . . When you say your prayers do you bring in other people, or is it only about yourself?"

Beach coloured faintly under the bright, penetrating eyes that were fixed upon him. "I suppose I bring in other people sometimes," he replied uneasily. He got into bed as if to indicate that the conversation was now ended, but Palmer did not move.

"Do you say your prayers really,—I mean, because you actually want to,—or only as a matter of custom? Would you bring young Hayes into them, for instance?"

Beach's colour deepened. "I don't see what on earth business it is of yours who I bring in," he said angrily. "You ask the most rotten questions sometimes—questions no one else would ever think of asking."

"Well, don't get your wool off about it. They mayn't be so rotten as they sound. At any rate, all you've got to do is not to answer."

"It isn't all I've got to do. You say things sometimes—that are all wrong. . . . And I believe you say them on purpose. You know from the way a person looks what the answer is."

"Of course I say them on purpose. Everything I do, I do on purpose. But I don't say them simply to annoy you."

Beach continued to look angry. It was not in him, however, to keep up such an attitude for long, and presently he smiled. "You're a queer chap, Dorset. Sometimes I'm hanged if I can tell what you're up to. It's usually a case of giving you the benefit of the doubt."

"There shouldn't be any doubt," Palmer retorted. "There wouldn't be if you weren't so

suspicious. You seem to think I have all kinds of ulterior motives."

Beach laughed. "Well, haven't you?"

"No; not necessarily."

He sat there, with his knees doubled up to his chin, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"And I don't see why you wouldn't tell me about your prayers," he went on, "or why I shouldn't have asked. Where you make a mistake is in imagining that I'm not as frank as you are. I'm really far more so. And it's just because of that that I perhaps ask questions which you wouldn't ask."

"You certainly do," Beach agreed.

"You don't understand," said Palmer. "It's because I want to know all about you. If you're going to be my pal I must do that."

"I thought I was your pal already," Beach said, with a yawn. Now that he was comfortably in bed he was beginning to feel sleepy.

"You are, to a certain extent. I'm talking seriously, though you don't appear to think so. . . . You are, to a very considerable extent."

"Only that?"

"Don't say 'only that.' 'That' is a very great deal. I'm not like Doherty and Weston and the rest. For me to be your pal *means* something—something worth having, something you could rely on absolutely, no matter what you were to do—even if it was murder. I daresay you don't believe me."

Beach laughed. "Of course I believe you.

It's only that you appear to be so frightfully cautious about it all."

"I'm not sentimental."

"No, I rather gathered that."

"I don't care much for sentimental friendships . . . what I've seen of them."

"Neither do I."

Next moment, under Palmer's gaze, he felt himself beginning to colour. It was stupid, and he fought against it, but that only made it worse; and a deep blush spread over his face. He was silent, vaguely troubled, almost, indeed, ready to grow angry again. But he swallowed down his emotions and asked quietly enough, "Why are you so up against any kind of sentiment?"

"I never said I was."

"You did just now." He drew his watch from under his pillow. "Do you know, it's nearly two o'clock."

Palmer did not seem to hear him. "I said 'sentimental,' which is different. I don't like anything that isn't what it seems; anything that throws dust in your eyes. It's much the same as getting drunk, and I couldn't stand that. I hate the idea of having my mind or my will dulled or weakened in any way. I must see things as they are and know what I'm doing."

"I usually know what I'm doing."

"You don't see things as they are: you don't want to. You see them as you would like them to be. You can't even see *me* as I am. You keep on giving me the 'benefit of the doubt,'

as you call it. That means the benefit of qualities you would like me to have, and that I haven't, and never will have. You're so keen on the imaginary that you won't see the real. . . . What I care for most is excitement. I don't mean the feeble silly excitement you might get from running round with chaps like Cantillon, but the sort that's mixed up with nerve and skill and cleverness. I like to take risks—but I like them to be for something worth while. I don't want anything that's easy. What I'd like most of all would be to have a job in some sort of secret service. Failing that, I'd like to be a detective; and failing that, I'd like to be a criminal."

"Well, we ought to turn in now, oughtn't we?" Beach said, sleepily.

Palmer put his feet slowly to the ground. "It's two o'clock, you say? That means I won't get up till ten. Don't make a row in the morning."

Beach chuckled drowsily. "Oh rot! You must get up. Breakfast's at eight."

Palmer shook his head. "Eight hours sleep :—I've made it a rule."

"But what time do you think you'll get to school at?"

"About half-past eleven."

"And I'm to go on without you?"

"I'm afraid so, if you don't want to be late. . . . Though what you expect to do at school when you're only half awake I don't know."

"But mummy won't be pleased."

"You shouldn't put it that way: it makes it more difficult for me. . . . I can't break my rule."

"I think your rule's a rotten one," Beach murmured indistinctly.

"It's founded on the laws of Nature. Do you imagine I'm going to ruin my health merely to avoid six from Limpet? It can't be done, old cock."

"Oh, your health be blowed."

Palmer switched off the light and got into bed without further argument.

## XV

"THIS," said Palmer, "is a perfect nuisance."

He sat cross-legged on the grass, his straw hat tilted back, a broken cricket stump in his hands. Evan and Beach lay near him.

All round the field, in the shadow of the trees, were groups of boys, with here and there a master. The hot sun flamed down, picking out vividly the white flannels of the players, the coloured blazers of the supporters of the rival team, who were gathered in a little knot apart, the yellow buttercups and white daisies where the grass near the wall grew longer and greener.

"What's a nuisance?" asked Beach, lazily.

"Our chaps are coming out to field. It's more than a nuisance: it's stinking bad luck." He took out his knife and began to whittle at the end of the stump. "I intended to go home as soon as I had seen the Weston exhibition, but now it may be an all-day job. These blighters will probably be batting for at least an hour and a half."

"You can watch Weston at long on," Beach told him. "He's jolly good."

"I daresay; but I haven't reached the stage when I can appreciate fielding. It's all very well for enthusiasts like you and young Hayes. . . ."

He followed the placing of the men with languid interest. "They're putting O'Neill on to bowl. That's Ledgy's doing. . . . Weston looks rather different now, doesn't he, from what he did an hour ago, when he was trying to do a sum on the blackboard? As Ledgy says, at maths he covers himself with chalk and ignominy, but with a bat in his hands he becomes bright and particular, like the celebrated star. He's the only chap on the field who has a crease in his trousers. It behoves us to notice these little things. It's jolly hard to keep a crease in flannel bags. Much of Weston is in that beautiful crease; much in the parting of his hair. The parting is a sort of symbol. It fits in with all the perfect strokes he's going to make presently—the late cuts and beautiful drives." Palmer yawned. "It were well to have food," he said. "It were better still to have drink:—something coloured; something pink with ice in it and froth on the top; something in a tall glass, to be drunk delicately through straws." He looked all round, not at the game, which had just begun, but at the spectators. "I wonder where our new pal, Cantillon, is? Burke and Grainger also are missing. Grainger's absence is insignificant, but Burke is a little sportsman, and would be here if he could. I have been conducting a preliminary inquiry which makes these facts of some interest."

"Oulton is over there," said Beach. "He's talking to Darley."

"Yes, I see him. What would you say to taking a stroll round?"

"To Oulton?"

"No. Oulton is evidently out of this—at present. I'm thirsty, any way, and we can get a drink at the 'founting.'"

He got up, and Beach, too, rose. "Coming, Evan?"

"Why disturb young Hayes?" asked Palmer, kindly. "He probably wants to watch the match."

"Oh, I don't care." Evan got up, and brushed little bits of grass and stick from his clothes. "Where are you going to?"

"We're going a-milking—or rather a-watering. They ought to start a sort of temperance pub here in the summer term—free drinks, to be charged up in the bills."

They skirted the cricket field, and passed through the porch. Out in the quadrangle Palmer stopped to drink at the fountain, thoughtfully splashing his leavings over Evan's shoes.

"There's not a soul about," said Beach, looking round.

"With Lupin one must never trust to appearances. . . . Though I don't quite know who you expected to see."

"I thought we were looking for Cantillon," Beach replied innocently.

Palmer's glance was not one of admiration. He had understood that young Hayes was to be left out of the inquiry. "Did you think he'd

be standing in the middle of the quad?" he asked sarcastically. "Come along."

He sauntered on down past the mathematical schools, the others following him. "Walk quietly," he suddenly whispered back over his shoulder, as they drew near the chemical laboratory, "and keep close to the wall."

By the door of the ball-alley he stopped a moment to listen: then he went in, still followed by Beach and Evan.

They did not see Cantillon. Two little boys of about twelve or thirteen were there, but they were alone. They were not playing a game: they were standing side by side, near the farther wall, doing nothing; and one of them jumped nervously when Palmer came in. They gazed with startled eyes at Dorset and his companions, but did not speak. One was a sturdy little chap; the other, though rather the taller of the two, was pale and frightened-looking, with the eyes of a child who sleeps badly. It was he who had started, he whose collar and hair were ruffled, whose clothes needed brushing, whose face needed washing.

Nobody spoke, but Beach returned the gaze of the unhappy Burke and Grainger with conscientious, if somewhat unnecessary severity. He had no idea what Palmer wanted with the kids, and, now that they had tracked them down, the whole affair began to strike him as a little ridiculous, and at the same time as not at all in his line. In fact, after his first stare, he felt inclined to retire with Evan, and leave

the field altogether to Dorset. But Evan's curiosity was aroused. Though, with Beach, he was entirely in the dark as to Palmer's purpose, he had an idea that something was going to happen, and he disregarded the tug the former gave his arm—a tug in the direction of the door.

The little boys gazed at their larger visitors like animals—not very wild animals—in a cage. “If they'd only hold hands they'd be exactly like the Babes in the Wood,” Evan whispered in Beach's ear. “Dorset must be the Wicked Uncle.”

Palmer's method of silent scrutiny was indeed too much for Grainger, who had begun to retreat, moving slowly along the wall, his back pressed against it. Burke, however, stood his ground, though his face got very red. He might even have made a remark had not Beach, at this point, decided that there had been enough of this cat and mouse game—one he strongly objected to under any circumstances.

“What are you kids mucking about in here for?” he asked with gruff good nature. “You needn't look so scared, Grainger. Why aren't you watching the cricket?”

Grainger's mouth opened, but it was Burke who replied. “We're waiting for—a chap.”

“Well, cut along then and wait somewhere else. You're keen enough on cricket, Burke:—what do you want hanging about a dismal hole like this on a fine afternoon? You'd better go and watch the match.”

"Half a 'mo,'" said Palmer quickly, as the little boys, without speaking, turned towards the door. "I've something to say to you first. . . . You'd better leave this to me," he added pointedly, for Beach's benefit.

Burke and Grainger had halted at the word of command, and they now stood once more side by side.

"Who are you waiting for?" Palmer asked.

"For—a chap," answered Burke, who was evidently the spokesman.

Palmer's voice was very quiet. "Now, look here," he said, "we're not going to eat you: this is all for your good, and you needn't be frightened to answer my questions. I'm going to look after you. You see? And anyone I look after is as safe as he would be at home with his mother. You perhaps didn't know that; but you may take my word for it. If you don't believe me, ask any person you like,—Cantillon, for instance,—and if that person was taking an interest in you before, you'll find that he'll quite suddenly stop doing so—quite suddenly and completely. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Burke.

"Now, I know all the answers to my questions beforehand; but I want you to give them to me just the same:—it will show you have confidence in me. . . . We'll begin again. Who are you waiting for? The answer to that, of course, is Cantillon. You see I know; but all the same you must give it."

"He told us not to tell," said Burke. "You

won't say anything about it, please, Dorset, will you?"

"That depends on circumstances. But you needn't be frightened. Nothing will happen to you. Where is he now?"

"I don't know. He just told us we were to come here."

Palmer weighed this for a moment before he went on. "Cantillon is a great friend of yours, of course?"

"Y—es."

"A great friend," Palmer repeated encouragingly. "Cantillon's an awfully decent chap, isn't he?"

"Y—es."

"He must be, because most fellows of his age don't bother making friends with boys about four or five years younger than themselves;—do they? I don't, for instance, and Traill doesn't, and Weston doesn't."

"No."

"Cantillon, however, is different. He's different in lots of other ways too, I daresay? Isn't he?"

"Y—es."

"The sort of boy you'd like to ask home for the holidays? Very likely you're going to write to your mother this week or next week to tell her how nice Cantillon is, and how much she'd like him, and how decent he's been to you, and ask her to ask him for the summer holidays?"

"I'm not going to do anything of the kind,"

said Burke, indignantly, while Grainger, not altogether unexpectedly, began to snivel.

Burke nudged him with his elbow. At the same time he apologised for him. "He's always blubbing," he explained. "He can't help it."

At this libellous description Grainger suddenly found his tongue. "I'm not," he protested, with lachrymose resentment.

"That reminds me, I want to speak to Grainger privately," said Palmer. "We'll just go in next door to the 'lab' for a minute or two." He glanced at Beach and closed one eye rapidly. "The rest of you can wait for us here, including Burke. . . . Wait out of sight, however," he added quickly, "because it won't do to disappoint Cantillon if he turns up. And he'd be extremely disappointed if he happened to catch a glimpse of you from the quad,—all of you together, I mean:—in fact he'd very likely go away without coming in."

Palmer peeped out cautiously to make sure that the coast was clear; then he and Grainger withdrew.

In ten minutes or so they returned, and none too soon, for almost immediately they heard the sound of footsteps on the cinders without. Palmer, gliding noiselessly to the open doorway, stood flat against the wall beside it, and next moment Cantillon, with a smile on his pale, rather spotty face, lounged in. But he stopped abruptly, and changed colour, when he saw who was there. "Hello!" he stammered in some confusion.

Beach, to whom this remark appeared to be addressed, took no notice. Standing with his hands in his pockets, and his brows drawn together, he looked, in fact, at that moment distinctly dangerous, and Cantillon gave a nervous laugh.

"Hello, Hayes!" He made a movement as if about to retire by the way he had come, but suddenly staggered forward instead, and just saved himself from falling. Wheeling round, he faced Palmer, whom he had not till then noticed.

"What's the rag? What are you all doing here?" he giggled with affected good humour.

"We were waiting for *you*," said Palmer, lightly. "You see, we found these kids waiting, so we thought we'd keep them company."

Cantillon's fixed, uneasy smile seemed painted on his face, like a comedian's make-up. It never altered, though his small, hard eyes moved quickly from one to the other of the boys assembled there, and he evidently scented danger. As well as he could he assumed an air of friendly surprise, but his mouth began to tremble.

"Well?" Palmer continued. "The kids have obeyed instructions; you see them here. What is it you want with them?"

"I don't want them," Cantillon bluffed, with an embarrassed laugh. "It was only a rag."

"I know you don't want them at present:—far from it:—but what *did* you want with them?" Palmer spoke gently, almost affectionately.

"Unburden that peculiar mind of yours, Cantillon. Who knows:—we may perhaps even let you off!"

Cantillon made an attempt to bluster, but the attempt was unavailing. "I don't know what you mean," he answered, taking a step towards the door. Evan, indeed, allowed him to pass, but Palmer collared him again, and led him, scarcely resisting, to the other side of the alley.

"Come over here, Cantillon, and then you won't be so fascinated by that door." He spoke to him in the approved Ledgy manner, drawling his words, though he could not quite get into them all Ledgy's superciliousness. "The sunlight and the trees and the open sky are naturally attractive to a person of your temperament, but you must stay with us a little longer."

He released him as he spoke, and Cantillon at once showed himself as still reluctant to stay. This time, however, his path was blocked by Beach.

"I say, let me pass," Cantillon twittered on a high, bird-like note. "Don't be a fool."

Beach, who had long since been "fed up" with the whole affair, promptly smacked his face. "Don't call me a fool," he said.

"Good old Beach!" chuckled Palmer. "Now the fat's in the fire."

But the fat wasn't. Cantillon whitened, and did nothing. Even the rather sickly smile still lingered on his face, as if to protest that, of course, he knew the whole thing was a joke—

a good joke too, though one they really ought to drop now before it grew stale.

"You're fond of getting up fights between kids," said Beach, roughly. "Wouldn't you like to try one on your own?"

"I don't want to fight," answered Cantillon, truthfully. "I mean, we've—we've nothing to fight about: we haven't quarrelled."

"I can smack your face again," Beach suggested, "if that would make it easier."

Cantillon looked round, and his quick glance instantly fastened upon Evan, who was hanging back from the others, and who, from the beginning, had taken no part in the matter. A cunning, treacherous light came into his eyes. "I know nothing about fighting," he said. "You and Dorset are always boxing in the gym. But I'm not afraid of Hayes: I'll fight Hayes if he likes."

Evan turned crimson. He was conscious that Palmer Dorset was looking at him curiously, and that Beach, having glanced once, was studiously *not* looking. He felt as if he had been caught in a trap. He knew that Dorset knew; that Beach knew: and now they were waiting. . . .

Almost at once, however, Beach intervened. "Yes, it's like you to pick out a kid. It's a wonder you didn't choose Grainger. Dorset and I are nearer your own age. You'll take on either one or the other of us."

"I won't," said Cantillon frankly. "If you want me to say you can lick me, I'll say it. I

know you can. I've never learned boxing and you're always at it—even with the sergeant. But I'm not afraid of Hayes."

Beach turned to Evan. He was on the point of telling him to give Cantillon the biggest thrashing of his life, but something seemed to check the words on his lips, and in the silence that followed he felt himself flushing. He glanced quickly at Palmer, and saw that he was staring at Evan. Cantillon saw it too, saw Beach's embarrassment and sniggered maliciously. Then Beach seized him by the shoulders and shook him savagely. "If I ever catch you messing about with any of these kids again," he said, "I'll give you such a hammering that you'll not forget it in a hurry. Now, clear out." He swung him round in the direction of the doorway, and sent him staggering half-way to it with a lusty kick. Cantillon turned round for a moment. His face was a little distorted, and his eyes glinted with an abominable malignity, but he took Beach's advice.

There was a silence among the three elder boys as they stood gazing out after him into the hot sunshine. Burke and Grainger, a little apart, were talking together eagerly, their heads wagging nearly as quickly as their tongues. They had already recovered their spirits, and it was apparent to Palmer that the whole proceedings would be spread over at any rate the lower school before they were many hours older. He considered this to be on the whole desirable; it would certainly act as a check on

Cantillon; and he decided not to interfere. "I think we may go back and watch the match," he remarked dryly.

They went out, Beach walking between Evan and Palmer, the two little boys, gabbling all the time as hard as they could, following a few yards in the rear.

Beach seemed moody and discontented: Evan was silent and walked with his head slightly bent: Palmer alone had not lost his customary nonchalance.

"Well, I suppose that's all we can do," Beach muttered, more for the sake of saying something than for any other reason.

"It isn't nearly all we can do," replied Palmer, cheerfully, "but I daresay it is sufficient for the time being."

Beach frowned. "What were you pumping the kid about; and why did you take him outside to do it?"

"I didn't pump him. I merely seized the psychological moment, when a desire to pour out his sorrows was irresistible."

Beach grunted something unintelligible.

"I admit," Palmer went on, "that both remarks about 'mother,' and particularly the one about writing home to her, were rather off; but I tried—for everybody's sake—to make them as little sloppy as possible. It may have been playing it a bit low down on the kids, but it was absolutely necessary, and it worked. It was really that that moved Grainger to unburden his grimy little soul. I got quite enough from

him, at any rate, to put Cantillon in the soup if necessary. However, we can discuss the details another time. What are you going to do now?"

They had come back to the cricket field, but stopped just outside the porch. At a distance of forty yards or so Cantillon was sitting on the grass between Miles Oulton and Darley, talking and laughing as if nothing had happened.

Beach gave them a single glance, and then turned away. "I'm going home," he said shortly. "I must make a start on those beastly lines. I'm going to finish them for to-morrow if I have to sit up all night to do it." He paused. "I suppose you two aren't coming?"

Palmer shook his head. "I'm going to wait and watch young Weston bat," he replied. "I seem to have told you that about fifty times already, so this makes the fifty-first. I shall sit down somewhere rather close to Cantillon, I think," he went on slowly. "He appears to be enjoying himself too much, and I fancy I may have a chastening effect."

"I'll come with you," said Evan to Beach; but Palmer, who had never once looked at him, was already sauntering towards the spot he had marked out, and Beach could see, with a grim satisfaction, that Cantillon already was aware of it.

## XVI

"WHAT was all the fuss about?" Evan asked, when they had passed through the tall iron gates and were out on the street.

"What fuss?"

"About Cantillon. What's he been doing?"

"Oh, bullying kids, and making a general hound of himself."

But he seemed disinclined to talk, he seemed to Evan to be in a bad temper, and they walked on in silence. Evan felt aggrieved. They had dragged him,—Traill and Dorset,—they had dragged him into this affair; and now, just because he had not fought a boy bigger and older than himself, they looked down upon him. It was Beach's fault more than anybody's else. If he didn't choose to talk he needn't: he could jolly well walk home alone. Evan whistled below his breath to show his indifference.

He had no quarrel with Cantillon. Secretly he had felt rather flattered by his advances. He disliked him now, but it was only because Cantillon had turned upon him, not because of anything he had heard about him. There was a sort of intolerance in Beach, a sort of way he had of rushing to conclusions, of insisting on his own point of view as the one which everybody else must adopt, that irritated Evan.

Beach was always right; Beach always knew; if he said a person was a rotter that was quite sufficient, without any further evidence:—you were to accept that and act upon it.

“Dorset and I were thinking of camping out,” Beach began suddenly. “We were talking about it last night, and of course we want you to be there too. We’d have a jolly good time.”

“Where? How can you do it?” Evan’s tone was slightly sulky, but Beach took no notice.

“We’ll rig up a tent in the woods.”

Evan made no reply, and Beach thought he was going to refuse.

“It would be rather a lark,” he went on persuasively, though he wondered at the same time what Dorset would say, and still more what he would think. He was afraid that from that afternoon Dorset would be less keen than ever about young Hayes. The effects of that afternoon he indeed foresaw as rather far-reaching, though he had done what he could at the time to nullify them, when he had grabbed Cantillon by the scruff of the neck and kicked him out of the alley. Still, he was sure he had deceived nobody—not even the kids. He could hear, in imagination, the very words in which these latter would spread the story over the school. “Then he said he would fight Hayes, and Hayes got as red as fire. He offered twice to fight him. Of course he’s a lot older and bigger, but still——”

“We’ll only do it if the weather keeps fine,”

he continued aloud. "It ought to be good sport. What do you think?"

"I'd like it all right, but——"

"We'll fix up the tent to-morrow, or Saturday. No, I can't to-morrow:—I promised mummy to take her up the river. I said I'd bring you too. You'll come, won't you?"

"Thanks:—if I won't be in the way."

"And you'll speak to your people about camping out?"

Evan still hesitated.

"Don't you think they'd let you? I'll come and help you to persuade them, if you like."

"It's not that."

"What is it, then? Don't you want to?"

"It's—it's Dorset."

Beach's face fell. "What about him?"

"I don't think he'd *want* me."

"But haven't I told you he does. We thought of you the minute we decided to have a camp at all."

"You mean, you did."

"Yes, and he did too. The camp was his idea."

As he spoke, he noticed a dapper little man, with a very big moustache, walking towards them down the nearly empty street, swinging an umbrella jauntily. The little man greeted them and stopped, changing his umbrella from his right hand to his left.

"Well! Getting home from school? You're late to-day, aren't you?"

Evan's face was scarlet.

"Yes. There was a match. . . ." Then, as Mr Hayes showed no sign of moving on just yet, but stood smiling at them each in turn, "This is my father," he mumbled awkwardly to Beach.

"Pleased to meet you," Mr Hayes remarked affably, shaking hands. "We've heard a lot about Beach Traill." He smiled with an obvious desire to be as friendly as possible. "Mrs Hayes was telling me she had asked you to come to tea with us some evening."

"Thanks very much," Beach replied. He noticed that for some reason Evan continued to look embarrassed, but he could see nothing to make him so—unless it was that he hadn't wanted him to be asked.

"What evening would suit you?" Mr Hayes pursued pressingly. "What do you say, Evan?"

Evan apparently said nothing, and Beach himself answered, "Any evening would do, so far as I'm concerned. . . . Any evening except this evening," he suddenly remembered. "I've got a rotten 'imp.' that I must do to-night."

"An imp?"

"Imposition, you know. Lines," Beach laughed.

"Shall we say to-morrow then? That will be Friday, and you won't have much work to do, I daresay."

"To-morrow will suit me first-rate. Evan's coming up the river with us in the afternoon, and we can come straight on from there together."

"Well then." Mr Hayes twirled his umbrella. Suddenly he pointed at a house opposite, and

his face grew graver. "There's a priest lives there," he remarked mysteriously.

"Yes, I know: Father O'Brien."

"Oh, you know him, do you?" Mr Hayes was too polite to ask the questions that hovered at the end of his tongue.

"He's a friend of ours. Evan knows him too: he met him at dinner."

Evan looked down.

"Oh, indeed!" Mr Hayes glanced at his son. "You didn't mention him, Evan, I think."

"No—I forgot."

It suddenly dawned upon Beach that Mr Hayes possibly disapproved of Roman Catholics. "He's a very decent sort, you know," he said, smiling broadly. "Everyone likes him. He's a great friend of mum—of my mother's."

Mr Hayes digested the idea of this friendship slowly:—he even made a slight gustatory noise with his lips. But all at once he brightened up amazingly and again shook hands. "I must be getting back to the office. We'll expect you to-morrow night, Beach. Don't be getting any more 'imps' in the meantime." He laughed, and with a final wave of his hand walked off briskly, leaving the boys to continue on their way.

"I say, we forgot all about the camping out," Beach suddenly recollected. "We might have settled up the whole thing. Shall we go after him?"

He looked back as he made the suggestion, but Evan failed to take it up. "There's plenty of time," he said.

They walked on, but they had not gone more than fifty yards when Evan asked, "You won't mind coming to-morrow night, will you?"

"Mind?" Beach repeated, not understanding him. "How do you mean? Why should I mind?"

"I mean—— It won't be like what you're accustomed to—and all that——"

Beach suddenly coloured. He felt a kind of jar, a rather disagreeable one. "Don't talk like an ass," he said roughly.

"Well, I thought I'd better tell you."

"Doesn't your father like Roman Catholics?" Beach asked desperately, seizing on the first thing that occurred to him to change the subject.

"Oh, he was a little surprised at your knowing a priest—that was all."

"Mummy is a Roman Catholic, you know; and nearly all her people are. You'd better tell him."

"But you aren't."

"No; my father was a Protestant."

They had arrived at the end of Evan's street, and Beach, contrary to his usual plan, paused there. As a rule he accompanied Evan to his door, but somehow, to-day, he felt disinclined to go any further than the corner; felt glad, indeed, that the corner had been reached. Evan did not press him—he never did for that matter—and they parted rather abruptly.

## XVII

BUT by the next day the little cloud, such as it was, had completely vanished. Beach, certainly, had forgotten all about it when, on coming out after school, he looked round for Evan. "Do you mind waiting a minute. I have to show some lines to Ledgy. I won't be a sec."

Mr Ledgerwood, again taking detention, was seated before a table on a low square platform at the end of the room. He had just finished calling the roll, and now leaned back in his chair, watching with an air of profound boredom the thirty or forty boys of various sizes and ages who, with their books open on the scored and hacked desks before them, sat trying to look as industrious as possible. Mr Ledgerwood strongly disapproved of this detention business; he regarded it as one of the many impositions levied by stupidity upon intelligence; and to-day he disapproved more than ever. Dr Melling, he knew, was pottering about in the next room and might come in at any moment, so that a volume of Maupassant's tales, with which he had intended to pass the time, remained in the pocket of his dark blue, double-breasted coat.

He stretched his long legs beneath the table and looked discontented and ill-tempered. The sunlight streamed through the open windows on

to the bare wooden floor. The sound of a mowing-machine droned a background to the shouts of playing boys. Mr Ledgerwood's rather heavy-lidded eyes rested on Beach Traill as he walked up the room, but, though any interruption was welcome just then, their expression did not alter, nor did it alter when Beach mounted the two steps at the side of the platform and presented his five hundred lines. Mr Ledgerwood merely took them, glanced at them, and tossed them down on the table.

"Those boys who are in for one lesson stand up," he said.

About twenty boys rose to their feet; a few, who were unaccustomed to Ledgy's methods, grabbing their caps and books so as to lose no time in getting out. Mr Ledgerwood watched them for ten seconds or so without interest. "Sit down again," he then remarked.

Picking up the lines once more, he turned to Beach.

"What is the meaning of all this, Traill? Who gave you this imposition?"

"It's for you, sir."

"For me!"

"For what happened the other day."

The schoolmaster frowned. "I didn't give you an imposition," he said.

"No, sir. . . . I thought I'd better do one."

Mr Ledgerwood rustled the neatly-pinned sheets of paper as he glanced over them with a dissatisfied air. He knew well enough why the imposition had been written, and his first impulse

was to return it without further comment. He did not do so, however, but looked searchingly at Beach.

"These lines appear to be particularly carefully done," he at last said, very deliberately. "How long did you spend over them?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Some people might regard the whole thing as a calculated impertinence." He looked again at Beach before he added, "But I'm inclined not to take that view. On the other hand, I don't want lines I didn't give you. . . . I'd better put them to your credit, I suppose."

Beach turned to go. Ledgy could do what he liked with the lines,—get them framed if he liked,—he had paid his debt now, and that was all he cared about.

"Wait a minute, Traill." He glanced down at the front row of boys through half-closed lids. "Thompson, do me a hundred lines of 'Paradise Regained,' beginning with 'Discovered in his fraud, thrown from his hope.'"

"Me, sir!" exclaimed the injured and innocent Thompson, in tones of astonished expostulation. "What for, sir?"

"For trying to overhear remarks which were not addressed to you. The phenomenal length of your ears, Thompson, though interesting from a physiognomical point of view, is not a thing one likes to see you taking advantage of." He turned to Beach, and his voice was lowered. "I'm sorry, Traill, I wasn't more sympathetic on that occasion when you came to my house.

I've an idea now that I misjudged you, and I think I ought to beg your pardon."

Beach looked uncomfortable as he mumbled something which remained inaudible.

"If you were a schoolmaster—and you may thank God you never will be!—you would know how easy it is to make mistakes. I'm sorry, however, that I made this particular one: I ought to have been able to tell."

"Oh, it's all right, sir," said Beach, awkwardly.

Mr Ledgerwood smiled: "It's all right, of course, if you think so."

"Well, I do," and Beach suddenly smiled too.

"It would be still more all right if you would drop in to see me some evening when you've nothing better on. Will you?"

"Thank you, sir. Of course I'll come."

He waited for a moment, but that, apparently, was all Ledger had to say, and he hastened to rejoin Evan.

He found him kicking his heels in some impatience.

"I thought you said you wouldn't be a second."

"Well, I wasn't very long, was I?"

"About ten minutes."

"Sorry. I came away as soon as I could."

## XVIII

THEY took a tram home, so as not to keep Mrs Traill waiting. Beach flung down his books in the hall.

"Mummy will be in here," he said, opening a door and pushing Evan before him; but the only occupant of the room was Mr Oulton, who, dressed in a suit of light grey flannels, stood by the piano turning over some music.

Beach's face fell, though he recovered himself immediately, and, shaking hands with Mr Oulton, introduced Evan. But in his manner there was a perceptible lack of cordiality, even a suggestion of latent hostility, that could hardly have passed unnoticed.

"Your mother will be down in a few minutes," Mr Oulton said courteously. "I believe we're to have an afternoon on the river."

"Why?—Are *you* coming?"

The question slipped out involuntarily, and he tried to cover it up by explaining that "mummy" hadn't told him, while Mr Oulton smiled in a rather wintry fashion. Beach lingered for a little longer and then left the room.

Running upstairs, two steps at a time, he burst stormily into his mother's bedroom. Mrs Traill stood before a mirror pinning on her hat.

She smiled at him from the glass, but Beach's face was dark.

"What is *he* coming for?" he asked.

"Who is '*he*'?"

"Mr Oulton."

Mrs Traill gave a final touch to her hat and turned round. "What harm can poor Mr Oulton possibly do?" she asked gaily.

"How did he know anything about it?"

"He knew because I told him."

Even through his anger and disappointment he was conscious that his mother looked extremely pretty and animated, but somehow this served only to increase his indignation.

"Good gracious, dear, don't glare at me like that!" she laughed. "One would think I had done something dreadful. Mr Oulton happened to call, and when I told him I was going on the river with you and Evan he asked if he might come too. That is the explanation of the whole dreadful mystery, and I don't see anything to make a fuss about. I'm sorry if you are disappointed, but I really can't see what difference it makes whether he comes or not."

"Evan and I will go another day, then," said Beach.

His mother proceeded to draw on her gloves. He had never seen her angry—really angry—with anybody, but there was something in her face at present which told him that this last remark had very much displeased her.

All she said, nevertheless, was, "You can't possibly refuse to go now without being ex-

tremely rude. However, you must please yourself."

"You knew I wanted you alone," he repeated helplessly, "and that I was asking Evan on purpose."

"I know that you're behaving exactly like some spoiled little boy of eight or nine. How could I help what happened? One would think this was the only chance we were ever to have of going on the river."

She opened the door without further speech, and he followed her gloomily downstairs.

Mr Oulton was still standing by the piano. Beach saw the look of admiration and approval that came into his eyes when Mrs Traill entered the room, and he resented it; it filled him indeed with rage; and he could not understand why his mother did not resent it also. But she evidently didn't:—either that, or she was a very finished actress. . . .

And they set out, Evan and Beach walking on in front, Beach with a sulky, ill-tempered face that promised badly for the success of any pleasure party in which he was to be included. Very soon they reached the little landing stage where the boat was moored. Beach, always in stony silence, loosened the rope and got in first: then he grasped the stage firmly while Mr Oulton handed in Mrs Traill. Evan scrambled up to the bow, and Mr Oulton himself, last of all, with much deliberation proceeded to embark. It was at this point that Beach loosened his hold, and, whatever either he or Evan did,

the result was that the boat's stern swung slowly round. Mr Oulton had already one foot on board, but the other unfortunately was on the landing stage. Now the water was unusually low, and the stage at its edge was damp and slippery and covered with treacherous green weeds. The boat moved outward with Mr Oulton's weight, and, instead of jumping for it, he tried to recover himself, failed, and next moment splashed into the river. He went in plump, on his back, going completely under, though the water was not very deep. Beach made frantic grabs at the bank with a boat-hook.

There was a little "Oh!" of alarm from Mrs Traill, a few seconds of silence, and then Beach laughed. He checked himself quickly, but the laughter must have sounded—clear, unmistakable—in Mr Oulton's ears as he scrambled ashore.

"I'm sorry," Beach apologised. "I must have let go too soon."

Mr Oulton took no notice of him. "I'm afraid this puts an end to *my* share in the excursion," he said with a faint smile to Mrs Traill, who was gazing at him in consternation. He took his hat, which Beach had fished out with the boat-hook, and, holding it in his hand, stood there dripping.

"It's really too bad," said Mrs Traill, "and it's all owing to Beach's carelessness."

Beach had drawn the boat in again, and she stepped ashore beside Mr Oulton. "You must let him lend you some dry things."

"I think if you lend me the car that will be still better. I'd rather get home as quickly as possible."

"Of course. Beach will run on at once and get things ready."

"No need to run," said Mr Oulton. "I'll come with him and we'll walk quickly. It will help to dry me."

He and Beach stepped out in advance of the others and almost immediately Mr Oulton said, "That was a rather shabby trick to play."

Beach stared at him in feigned astonishment. "What trick? You don't mean to say you think I did it on purpose!" But his acting was indifferent, and in the middle of it he suddenly coloured and looked down.

"Fortunately your mother believes it was an accident," Mr Oulton pursued calmly. "She naturally would. I expect even the other boy does that, unless you took him previously into your confidence."

"So it——" Beach began, but did not finish.

"Don't tell me a lie about it: it really isn't worth while."

Beach was silent.

Mr Oulton, scrutinising him closely, suddenly rapped out, "*Was* it an accident?"

"No," answered Beach, defiantly.

"You did it because you were annoyed with me for coming:—did it out of pure spite, in other words."

Beach hung his head. He felt horribly uncomfortable, horribly in the wrong, yet at the

same time his dislike for Mr Oulton remained unaltered.

"I'm glad to see that at least you have the grace to look ashamed of yourself."

"I'm sorry," muttered Beach. "I know it was a rather dirty trick. . . . I'll tell mummy."

"You will please do nothing of the sort," said Mr Oulton, icily. "It's not the kind of joke she would appreciate, and there's no use vexing her for nothing."

"I'll tell her," Beach repeated. . . . "I think I'd better run on now and get hold of Royce: he mayn't be at the house."

He was starting off without waiting for a reply, but Mr Oulton called him back.

"Come here."

Beach halted reluctantly.

"Kindly understand clearly that I don't want you to tell your mother. You owe me that at least, after what has occurred."

"But I'd rather," Beach muttered obstinately.

"And I'd rather you didn't. I insist on your giving me your word about it."

"Why? It can't do you any harm."

"I'm not thinking of myself," answered Mr Oulton. "I happen to be a friend of your mother's; that is all. I don't want her to be annoyed, as she probably would be if she knew your dislike of me was carried to quite such a pitch as this afternoon's performance seems to prove."

"She knows I——" Beach began, and then stopped.

"I fancy she does not know that you would go to quite this length," Mr Oulton said, with a cold smile.

"What do you want me to do, then?" Beach muttered ungraciously.

"Nothing, except to keep your own counsel."

They had by this time reached the house, and Beach stood with lowered eyes, ashamed, yet obviously unrepentant. "Oh, all right," he said. "And—I'm sorry."

Before Mr Oulton could reply, he hastily left him there, and went in search of Royce.

## XIX

MR OULTON drove off, wrapped in a waterproof and a rug. Then Mrs Traill turned in displeasure to Beach.

"It was extremely stupid of you to let the boat loose like that. It's not as if you weren't accustomed to managing one and didn't know. . . . And then to laugh! There was nothing to laugh at."

"I couldn't help it. . . . Anyway, I don't suppose a ducking will kill him."

"Don't talk like that. You might at least be sorry."

"I told him I was sorry," muttered Beach, sulkily. He glanced with a sort of defiance at his mother. "The question is, are we going on the river or aren't we? I don't see why we should let this mess up our whole afternoon."

"I think you and Evan must go by yourselves, then," Mrs Traill replied. "I feel as if I had had quite enough of the river for one day." She entered the house, leaving the two boys in the porch.

"I suppose we may as well go," said Beach, angrily. It had suddenly occurred to him that Mr Oulton might come back when he had changed his clothes, and he wondered if his mother had had the same idea, and if that were

partly her reason for refusing to come with them.

"I'll do whatever you like," Evan replied, but without much enthusiasm.

"Perhaps it's hardly worth while. We have to be at your house at half-past six, and it's nearly five now."

They sat down where they were, but Beach was too full of his recent encounter with Mr Oulton to be a very entertaining companion. He already regretted his promise, though he did not see how he could have avoided giving it. But he did not want to be under even the suspicion of an obligation to his enemy. Somehow, he could not believe that in the attitude Mr Oulton had taken up there was any real magnanimity. He had an instinct that Mr Oulton had adopted it to serve his own private ends, even though he did not quite see how this would be effected. Of course he *might* have intended to be decent. . . . And then, all at once, he *did* see. It glared upon him abruptly, startlingly, like a flash of lightning:—the whole meaning flared out, filling him with a sudden apprehension. Yes, there was a reason why Mr Oulton did not want his mother to know how much he, Beach, disliked him; but it was not the reason he had mentioned:—it was at once a better and a worse one—more convincing and less unselfish. He would have given anything now to have been able to recall his promise. His only consolation was that the ducking had been very complete. At the present moment he would gladly have given him another

—one that he would have remembered — one that might have acted as a warning. . . .

All this time he sat in silence, and Evan began to feel distinctly bored. Presently the sound of the piano, and then of someone singing, floated out to them through an open window. Leaving Beach to his own devices, Evan got up and strolled round to the side of the house, his feet making no noise on the thick soft turf. Outside the open French windows he stood listening and watching, till, turning her head a little as she finished her song, Mrs Traill caught sight of him. Her hands rested on the keys and she smiled, while Evan blushed, and would have moved away had she not called to him to come in.

“I didn’t know you were listening. Are you fond of music?”

“Yes.” But he added that he very seldom heard any—any that he liked.

“Do you play, yourself?”

“No.”

“Where is Beach?”

“He’s round in the porch: I think he’s asleep.”

Mrs Traill laughed. There was something in the gentleness and shyness of the boy’s manner that pleased her. “So you didn’t go on the river after all! It’s really hardly fair, when you came up especially for that.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter.”

“Well, we must go another day.”

Evan summoned up all his courage. “Will you sing something else?” he asked huskily. “Would you mind?”

"Of course not. What would you like me to sing?"

"Anything."

She opened a book of Schubert's songs and Evan sat down. While she sang she could see him, with flushed cheeks, and bright eyes that never left her face. She sang two very short songs, and, as she played the opening bars of a third, "The Adieu," "Come and turn over for me," she called out.

She did not know why she said it:—it was partly, perhaps, because his rapt gaze of admiration was as sincere a compliment as she had ever received in her life. Evan rose at once and stood beside her. Presently she nodded her head for him to turn the page, but, as he stooped to do so, his arm touched her shoulder, and his hand shook. He tried to turn the leaf, but, instead, managed somehow to tumble the music into her lap. He stammered out apologies and looked quite miserable—so miserable that she had not the heart to laugh, but caught his two hands in hers, and, holding them firmly, looked straight into his face. With lowered gaze, he remained absolutely passive, save for the slight tremor that she could feel running through him. With that, and as he raised his troubled eyes for a moment, the whole thing became clear to her and she instantly released his hands. It struck her as so strange and unexpected that she hardly knew what to do. It was, of course, ridiculous, but at the same time she felt touched. She smiled as she looked at him kindly, with a

new interest, and wondered that he should be a friend of Beach and Palmer—he was so obviously different from them. She felt for a moment inclined to kiss him, but what she much more wisely did was to close the piano and send him back to Beach.

## XX

MR HAYES said grace.

"This has been a lovely afternoon."

"Papa, you'd better help the pancakes while they're hot."

"Yes, dear, I was going to. . . . How did you enjoy the river?"

"Papa, pass the lemon to Beach."

"We didn't go on the river. Mr Oulton fell in just when we were starting, so we didn't go."

"Dear me! I trust it wasn't serious?"

"No; it was rather amusing."

Mr Hayes sat silent, save for certain subdued sounds which accompanied the mastication of a pancake. The thought of his chief floundering in the water was not to him in the least amusing. He hoped that Evan at least had not laughed, and made a mental note to ask him if he had when Beach was gone.

"Papa, Beach will take some more pancakes. Just pass in your plate, Beach. Is your cup ready?"

Mr Hayes, still thinking of the accident on the river, removed the dish-cover with a faint sigh.

Afterwards, when the tea-things had been cleared away, they sat down to a game of whist,

Beach and Winnie playing against Evan and "papa." Mrs Hayes looked on, and it was she who discovered "papa's" revoke. "Papa, you've revoked," she cried. "You didn't follow suit the last time spades were led."

Mr Hayes, of course, distinctly remembered having followed suit; he remembered having followed suit even when the trick was turned up and only three spades were found in it. "But you said you had only two to begin with, papa. How were you able to play one the third time they were led?"

Mr Hayes was a little ruffled. Cards had been tabooed in the home of his youth, and it was only lately, and for the sake of his family, that he had learned to play whist. He took it remarkably seriously, as he took all things:—more seriously than his actual play perhaps suggested, for he was still liable to confuse spades with what he called "shamrocks." He gave in about the revoke, but when, a little later, Mrs Hayes said, "Papa, you've made a misdeal," he began to get really cross.

"How? What do you mean? How is it a misdeal?"

"You should have finished up with yourself."

"It doesn't matter where I finished up if they've all got thirteen cards. . . . Count your cards please. . . . I've got thirteen. Beach has thirteen. Evan has thirteen. Now, you see!"

"I've got fourteen," said Winnie.

"You can't have. You must have counted

wrong, Winnie. Beach and Evan have each thirteen, so you must have."

"But I *haven't*," said Winnie, snappishly.

"Papa has only twelve himself," laughed Mrs Hayes, who had lifted his cards from the table.

Mr Hayes snatched them from her and counted them again rapidly. His face turned red. "I wish you wouldn't interfere, dear. It puts everybody out. . . . Here, give me one of your cards, Winnie."

"No!" Winnie screamed. "Not that one! He's taken an ace. It isn't fair. We'll have another deal."

At ten o'clock Beach got up to go. Evan came out to see him off, and they lingered on the step for a minute or two, talking. Then they said good-night, and he heard the hall-door banging behind him.

He walked slowly down the street, disappointed, for he had expected Evan to come at least part of the way home with him. He had looked forward to this all evening (it had indeed been one of his reasons for leaving so early), but, instead, the door had shut—shut with a most emphatic slam—before he had reached the garden gate, and the gate was only three paces from the house. . . . He was a fool. . . .

At the end of the street he looked to see if a tram was coming. There was none in sight, so he walked on. Once, when he heard the sound of someone running behind him, he turned round, half expecting that it might be Evan:—

but it wasn't Evan. . . . Yes; he was a fool. . . .

He remembered certain words spoken by Palmer Dorset. They had not been meant for him perhaps: he did not know. Yes, he did know: there was no use deceiving himself. . . .

His friendship with Evan *was* different from his other friendships. It had come between him and his other friendships. He was inclined to wonder and to ask himself how much Evan cared for him—a thing he had never done in regard to Palmer Dorset or any other of his chums. If he had been to the Dorsets' house that evening, for example, instead of to the Hayes', Palmer very likely would have walked part of the way home with him, but that was not the point. The point was that, if he hadn't, it wouldn't in the least have mattered, he would never have given it another thought. Moreover, if he had wanted Palmer to come, he would have asked him to. That was the natural way to act. But with Evan it was always different:—he seemed, where Evan was concerned, unable to behave naturally, to take things naturally and simply. . . .

He hadn't asked him, because he had wanted him to come without being asked. And this was only one of many similar instances. He was constantly giving him opportunities to do things (making them deliberately, as if they were so many tests to try him by), and then, when Evan failed to do them, as happened in most cases, he was disappointed. . . . All that

was no good: he knew it was no good: and he vowed that he would never again allow anything of the sort to take place.

Gradually he argued himself into a more reasonable state of mind. After all, the fact that Evan had not come with him meant nothing. Why should it mean anything? Why should it mean anything in his case if it meant nothing in Dorset's? And the fact that he had shut the door so quickly meant nothing either:—at least, it meant only that his manners were not perfect. Again the difference became apparent. If Palmer had done a thing like that he should have told him about it. Evan he could not tell: at least, not in cold blood: he should be frightened of hurting his feelings, of his perhaps taking it to mean something that it did not mean. Worse than all else was this odious idea of class. Of course, if it came to that, Evan's people were *not* of his class. But why need the subject ever have cropped up? Evan himself had dragged it up deliberately, and Beach had seen it hovering in the background of his mind during all the earlier part of the evening. He wondered if he ought to get his mother to call on Mrs Hayes. He should tell her, anyway, all about the matter. He could quite safely leave it to her: she would know what it was best to do. He should tell her at once. And with this idea in his mind he hastened his steps.

When he reached the house he found Mr Oulton there. He greeted him curtly—more

curtly than he intended to, or than he was aware of—and when his mother, trying to make him talk, asked him how he had enjoyed himself, what they had done, and other similar questions, he answered in monosyllables, would not even sit down, but, with a brusque excuse that he was tired and sleepy, went off to bed.

## XXI

HE went to bed, but not to sleep. He lay awake hating Mr Oulton.

Certainly Mr Oulton's visits had been more frequent of late. . . . And there had been something to-night when Beach had entered the room—an air of intimacy, of repose—that had produced upon him a curiously disquieting effect. He had gathered from it, he did not know why, the impression that Mr Oulton and his mother had been sitting in silence. . . . That beast! . . . He clutched at a corner of his pillow and squeezed it as if it had been Mr Oulton's throat. If only he had something against him, something definite, something he could produce as evidence: but unfortunately he had nothing except an instinct which he could hardly expect anyone to put much faith in—a distrust of the man, a dislike after all too deep-rooted to be reasonable. The look of admiration which had come into Mr Oulton's eyes that afternoon when his mother had entered the room; his voice, his smile, his carefully deferential, yet not too ingratiating manner—they were all damnable. He knew now what they meant, though he hated to put his knowledge into words: he knew at last, though he had been slow to form such an idea. Mr Oulton wanted to marry his mother.

Suddenly the door opened softly, and in the light from the landing he could make out who was there. He lay still, perfectly still; and perhaps the complete absence of sound told her that he was awake. At all events she came in, closing the door behind her.

She sat down beside his bed. A faint light floated through the open and unblinded windows, but it was not sufficient for him to see her face by:—he could only see her very dimly. . . . And he heard her speak.

“I thought you were tired. Why aren’t you asleep?”

“I don’t know.”

There was a pause, and then his mother said, “Beach, dear, I want to talk to you.”

He had a sickening presentiment that she was about to break the dreaded news to him, to tell him perhaps that what he feared was already accomplished. She sat silent, and the silence was unendurable. The suspense was indeed nearly as painful as any words her lips might have uttered. He wished she would hurry. While he waited he felt as if all his life depended on what she was about to say, and his hands clenched and unclenched themselves in the effort of self-control. If she was engaged to Mr Oulton, he would not agree to it, he would fight against it, he would never, never give his consent; he would go away from home, go to America, to Australia, go as far away as possible.

But she only said, “Why did you leave the room like that to-night, as soon as you saw Mr

Oulton was there? It isn't the first time, either, that you have done so."

He swallowed a lump that rose in his throat. "I don't suppose he wanted me," he said.

"Whether he wanted you or not, that wasn't the way to treat him in your own house. You made me feel ashamed of you."

"I don't care for him," said Beach, miserably.

"I know you don't care for him. You make that very plain by every word you utter, and every look you give him. But even if you hated him, it would be no excuse for not behaving like a gentleman. Why do you dislike him?"

Beach did not answer.

"You don't know him. You have never tried to like him."

"I don't see why I should," said Beach.

"You should, if for no other reason than because he comes here as a friend of mine. You would think it very strange if I were to treat your friends in the way you behaved to-night to Mr Oulton."

"It's not the same," Beach muttered. "You know very well it isn't."

"Why?"

Then, as he seemed unable or unwilling to say why, she went on: "He likes you—in spite of all your rudeness. Just before you came in he had asked me for your photograph."

"Did you give it to him?" whispered Beach, breathlessly.

"Yes. I suppose you would have preferred me to refuse?"

Beach did not reply to this, and she could not tell what he was thinking. But it presently came out in words that she had not expected, though they scarcely surprised her after what had already passed. "If there was any one you had an objection to, I wouldn't ask him here."

He waited a moment before he went on, almost inaudibly: "If you'll stop asking Mr Oulton to the house, I'll give up any one of my friends."

His mother gave a faint cry that was half a real cry and half a laugh. But even yet she saw in his attitude nothing more than a mere boyish obstinacy. "How can you talk like that?" She put her arm round his shoulder and kissed him. "Don't you see, dear, how impossible—— But I know you didn't mean it, weren't thinking of what you were saying. Poor Beach. As if I should want you to give up your friends. Who would it be? Palmer? Can you imagine my asking you to?" Secure in the darkness, she had even a little, rueful smile for the tragic tone he had adopted.

He suffered her to kiss him and caress him; he returned her kiss; but, through all, he felt he had been defeated, that everything was to go on just as before;—felt helpless, baffled, and, above all, that he had not been treated fairly. He could not tell her what he feared. Perhaps his fears were groundless; but in any case it was impossible to mention them, though a denial, a promise, would have lifted the whole burden from his mind.

"However—I'll not ask him," Mrs Traill said softly.

Beach turned away his head. He had a horrible sensation that he was not far from blubbing, and to blub would be an everlasting disgrace. He struggled with himself. He wanted to accept his mother's offer, but she had somehow put it in a way that made its acceptance impossible. "Yes, ask him," he whispered.

And he could feel, in the darkness, that while she stroked his hair she was smiling at him, petting him, coaxing him, as if he were a jealous child.

"But I can't ask him if you're going to be rude to him," she reasoned gently. "You don't know how painful it is to me to see you behaving in a way that is unnatural to you—in the way you behaved to-night."

"I'll try to be all right," he said.

She kissed him again, but this time he merely submitted, he did not return her kiss. He remembered his intention to consult her about Evan and his people, but now he had lost all desire to do so. It was as if a barrier had grown up between them, as if their lives had branched off in opposite directions, as if what mattered to him was no longer the same as what mattered to her. Suddenly he realised that he was alone. His mother had slipped silently out of the room, and his chance was over. But he felt no desire to call her back.

## XXII

THE tent was up at last, and Beach stood contemplating it while he waited for Evan and Palmer. They had pitched it close to the orchard, and not really very far from the house. Wild cherry-trees, their blossoms like snow on the branches and on the ground, drooped their boughs above the stream; the black silhouettes of birds darted across the flaming green of lime and chestnut:—and the sun shone brightly, burning in the dark leaves of a young copper-beech, flooding the rich carpet of lush sweet grass, and turning the golden-green shrubs to fire.

“I’ll go and meet the others,” Beach thought.

He made his way in the direction of the lake, his feet moving, swish swish, through the long, flowering grass and clover. He passed down a path on which lay a soft matting of dead leaves, many inches deep, the accumulation of years; and when he reached the lake he stopped to watch the young swans.

They were not very long hatched, and their half-grown feathers were of a smoky grey. With their mother they paddled about close to the bank. Suddenly he saw a ripple in the water, and knew that it was a rat swimming. Quite near to Beach it reached land, and at the

same instant the mother swan stretched out her delicate white neck and struck down. The rat lay still. The mother drifted back among her young ones. It was all so quick and strange and silent that Beach stood gazing in amazement; but when he bent down and looked at the rat more closely—when he moved it with his hand—he saw that its back had been broken, and that it was quite dead. Everything around was quiet and sleepy in the hot sunshine. A bee hummed among the tall yellow irises; the trees were mirrored in the water. And the peculiar callousness of Nature dawned upon Beach at that moment for the first time. Several pairs of sharp eyes besides his own must have witnessed this murder, done so calmly and in cold blood; but the birds sang on, the young swans paddled after their parents, death had no meaning, pain no reality save to the sufferer: there was neither cruelty nor pity, because there was no imagination.

Beach scraped a hole under the root of a tree, and, putting the dead rat in it, covered it with earth. As he was finishing his task he looked up. Father O'Brien was watching him.

They had not met for some little time, and he walked back with the priest towards the house. When they drew near it, he persuaded him to leave the path and come round by the orchard. Through an opening in the trees the white tent was suddenly revealed.

"We're going to be jolly comfortable," said Beach, as he showed Father O'Brien all the

arrangements they had made for sleeping and cooking. "We'll be having holidays too. The school's going to break up: there was another case of diphtheria yesterday. That will mean about a fortnight extra."

"Where are Palmer and Hayes now?"

"They're getting their things. They'll be here any minute."

"And Miles?"

"We didn't ask Miles."

The priest looked at him with a sudden smile. "I heard about your adventure on the river the other day; or rather your misadventure."

Beach coloured a little. "It served him right."

"Why? I understood that it was you who were mainly responsible."

"It served him right for shoving himself in where he wasn't wanted."

"You didn't want him, then?"

"Rather not. I never wanted him in my life."

Father O'Brien laughed. "I expect the poor man doesn't realise that:—people often don't, you know."

"This will help him to realise it," said Beach. "You're not very keen on Mr Oulton yourself, are you? I can hardly imagine your being keen on him. He's not your sort."

"What do you think my sort is?" asked the priest, with some interest.

"Not him anyway."

Beach became silent. His own last words had suggested a new train of thought. Presently he said "I wonder if you'd mind telling me what

your opinion of Mr Oulton really is:—or ought I not to ask?”

Father O'Brien hesitated. He was not so surprised by this request as might have been expected. As a matter of fact, he had already guessed what lay behind it, and his answer was framed in accordance.

“I'm afraid I haven't given much thought to the matter,” was all he said.

This was in a sense true. That is to say, it was literally true. But in another sense it was an evasion of the truth, for he had certainly formed an opinion of Mr Oulton.

“I've always found him very agreeable, if that is what you mean.”

It wasn't, of course, and Beach said so. His next question demanded a direct reply.

“Is he a decent fellow, do you think?”

His frank clear eyes were fixed on Father O'Brien's face. “I'm sure he is,” the priest answered. “But your mother knows him much better than I do. I only know him very slightly.”

“Mummy doesn't know him at all,” said Beach, simply.

Nevertheless, he was nonplussed. He did not quite see how he could press the matter further without giving himself, and perhaps others, away. He apologised to Father O'Brien for having put such a question to him at all. The doubt and trouble that drifted across his young face were plain as clouds drifting across a summer sky. Father O'Brien took no notice of them.

"I—I know it's not the thing to ask you to talk about him," the boy was driven to begin again, as they walked towards the house. "But—it's a matter of great importance to me."

"Tell me what is in your mind," said the priest, kindly, and without looking at him.

"I don't know whether I ought to tell you," stammered Beach. "But—I've no one else."

Father O'Brien strolled on at his accustomed, deliberate pace, his hands clasped behind his back. "You have your mother," he suggested.

"It's just that," the boy returned dejectedly. "She knows I don't like him. She thinks it's only an idea I've got into my head; but ——"

He waited for Father O'Brien to help him out—waited, however, in vain.

"He comes a lot to the house:—more than he used to."

But when he had said this he stopped short, conscious that he was telling everything.

"Have you any reason for not liking him?"

"Nothing that would seem a reason. It's just a kind of feeling." He sought about in his mind for some illustration of what he meant. "If I had a dog I wanted a home for, I wouldn't give it to him."

His blue eyes anxiously scanned the priest's face, but Father O'Brien merely asked, "Do you think he wouldn't treat it well?"

"I—I would be afraid that he mightn't."

"You're not going to give him a dog, however."

"N—o."

The priest at last turned to him, and this time

he said deliberately — “I don’t think you need worry.”

“You don’t really?” Beach breathed—a mingled doubt and relief in his face.

“No.”

The boy waited a moment. He wondered if Father O’Brien had really understood everything. He must have. He had not intended to tell him:—all the same he was glad that he knew. “If you change your mind you will let me know?” he asked.

“I’ll remember what you have said.”

“You won’t promise any more than that?”

Father O’Brien did not seem to hear him, but Beach somehow felt that he was on his side.

## XXIII

NIGHT brooded over the woods. There was no moon, and from the trees a velvet darkness hung (soft, uncertain, deceptive), though out in the open, where the tent was pitched, there was sufficient light to reveal the scattered shrubs as dusky crouching forms, and, on the higher ground in the distance, a square indistinct mass that was the house. Suddenly from within the tent there arose a faint, startled scream.

A voice asked, "What's the matter?" and there followed the scraping of a match, and then Evan's reply: "Something ran over my face. It had little cold feet. It must have been a rat."

He lit the candle, and they could see him sitting up in bed, in his striped pyjamas, looking rather scared.

"What about a rat!" exclaimed Palmer, disgustedly. "Waking everybody up for nothing! I daresay you only dreamed it too."

"I didn't dream it, because I wasn't asleep. I haven't been asleep, and neither have you nor anybody else."

"Not much chance, with all the row you're kicking up. You'd better have stayed in the nursery."

"I wasn't asleep, anyway," said Beach.

"Neither was he," said Evan.

"You don't know whether I was or not."

Beach laughed. "It's always hard to sleep on the first night. Everything's so different. Let's build up the fire again. It can't really be awfully late."

By the light of the candle Evan looked at his watch. "It's not twelve yet."

Beach went to the door of the tent. "The fire isn't quite out. It'll be all right if we put on some more wood."

They heard him stirring the embers, and presently there arose the crackling noise and pungent smell of freshly kindled sticks. The other boys crept out like pallid phantoms, and squatted down in the light of the blaze.

"You'll find we'll be able to sleep all right to-morrow night," Beach went on. "It's just a matter of getting used to things."

"I'll not be here to-morrow night," Evan said. "At least, I'm nearly sure I won't. I wouldn't be allowed to come on Sunday."

"I won't be here either," said Palmer. "I've got an aunt and a young cousin coming. They're only stopping with us one night, so I can't very well leave the kid on his own."

"We'd better adjourn the whole thing till Monday, then."

"Somehow, it's not so comfortable in the tent as I thought it would be," said Evan. "It seems stuffier than in the house."

Palmer had found it stuffy also. "I don't see why we need sleep in the tent on nights like this. It would be better to sling hammocks

under the trees. We could use the tent when it was wet."

Beach agreed. "There are hammocks in the house somewhere, I know."

"I promised to go home on wet nights," said Evan.

"By the way," Palmer presently remarked, "Weston has asked me to spend the holidays with him. At least, he didn't ask me quite definitely, but he's written to his grandfather to ask if he can ask me. He says he's sure it will be all right."

"But the holidays won't be for a week or two yet."

"It all depends on when the school's going to break up. I shouldn't be surprised if we got off next week."

"We're going to Ballycastle for August," said Beach. "I wanted you to come with us."

"You shouldn't be so long in giving your invitations, then."

"You'll come, Evan, won't you?"

"Rather."

Palmer stirred the fire, and the flames shot up, throwing waves of dancing light and shadow across the grass, lighting up the leaves of the nearest apple-trees, and glowing on the faces of the three boys. In the darkness the sound of the stream, persistent and monotonous, seemed filled with sleepy wandering voices.

"I say, wouldn't it be ripping, now we're more or less free at night, to have some kind of adventure?"

Beach recognised the mood and glanced at Evan. "Darkness always seems to stir you up more or less, Dorset. Isn't this adventure enough?"

"This!" Palmer's tone expressed a mild astonishment.

"Well, it's what you wanted," answered Beach, rather offended.

"Oh, it's all right. It's all right as a sort of background—though young Hayes is the only one who has had an adventure. But we could vary it a little occasionally."

"I don't see how."

"Well, I see how. I've got a spiffing plan, only I don't know whether Hayes will like it."

"Then it won't do," said Beach, at once. "It must be one we'll all agree to or you needn't propose it."

"How the nation am I to know whether you'll agree to it or not?" said Palmer, testily. "I'm not a thought-reader."

Beach looked at him suspiciously. Palmer had a way of springing things on you at favourable moments, such as the present,—things that you found yourself let in for before you quite realised what had happened. "I suppose you had this in your mind all along?" he said.

"All along where?"

"You know what I mean. It was one of the reasons why you wanted to camp out."

"I wanted to camp out, anyway," replied Palmer, evasively.

"You didn't say anything about other adventures then."

"I don't remember what I said. There's no harm in making a suggestion, is there? If you don't like it you can leave it."

"Well, don't get waxy. If the idea's a good one we'll like it fast enough."

"It's this," said Palmer. He looked encouragingly from one to the other of his two listeners. "Suppose we broke into a house. Just for a lark, you know—to see if we could do it. . . . It would be great."

There was a silence. Then Beach asked calmly, "What would be great about it? I've no ambition to become a burglar."

"We won't do any burgling," Palmer explained hastily. "You don't imagine that that's what I want!"

"I never know *what* you want."

"It's just for the excitement, and to see if we can pull it off."

"And if we happen to be caught, as we're practically certain to be?"

"We won't be caught if you do what I tell you:—at least, I don't think so. Of course there's bound to be a little risk, or it wouldn't be worth doing."

"But if we *were* caught?"

"There's no use discussing that now. You can leave it to me."

"So far as I'm concerned, I'll leave the whole thing to you. I wonder what Evan's people would think if they knew the kind of company he was keeping."

"It's the best he's ever likely to keep," Palmer remarked unflatteringly.

"You're mad, you know, Dorset; quite mad."

Palmer looked straight at Evan. "It could be done. I know it could be done. Let young Hayes answer for himself."

Evan glanced at Beach. He laughed a little, but he said nothing.

"Well?" asked Palmer.

Evan laughed again.

"Oh, it's not the sort of thing I want to do. But of course I know it's all rot."

"*Why?* There's no *harm* in it. It's only a lark—a sort of game."

Beach shook his head. "It's not worth it, Dorset. At any rate, it's not our kind of game."

Palmer shrugged his shoulders. "Nobody ever wants to do the things I want to do. I suggested it to Weston, and he wouldn't do it. But it's different with him. He's more excuse than you chaps have, because, if he was caught getting out of school, he'd be expelled."

"This is all a yarn, you know," said Beach to Evan, who was gazing at Palmer in a sort of fascination. "I hope you're not taking it seriously."

Palmer's eyelids drooped. "We'd better go to bed: I'm getting sleepy."

"He got it out of some book or other," said Evan.

"Yes; out of a book." His plan once definitely rejected, Palmer characteristically allowed it to drop. He never wasted energy. "What kind of books do you like?" he asked, since there was nothing better to talk about.

Evan brightened up. "Oh, all sorts. Chiefly poetry and adventures. . . . Not adventures among burglars and that kind of thing," he added quickly, "but adventures like 'The Cloister and the Hearth.' 'The Cloister and the Hearth' is the best book I've ever read."

Palmer seemed unimpressed. "Can't say I've heard of it; but it may be better than it sounds. The poetry, I suppose, is swank."

"It's not swank. I've read through the whole of the 'Golden Treasury.'"

"I've read through the whole of the Bible, if it comes to that. I bet Weston five bob I'd read it inside a month, and I did. The best writers are Austin Freeman, E. W. Hornung, Gaboriau, Conan Doyle, and Maurice Leblanc. You needn't mention Shakespeare, and Milton and Dickens and Thackeray, because they're not in the list and never will be."

"'Roderick Random' is a jolly good book," said Evan. "I got it in Beach's library."

"*Beach's* library! What's that?"

"I mean the library up at the house."

"You shouldn't be allowed to run about there. You'll be picking up something unsuitable."

"Oh, shut up, Dorset. Leave him alone."

"It's good for him. He's too full of beans. What kind of tobacco did Sherlock Holmes smoke?"

"Shag."

"What kind of cigarettes did Raffles smoke?"

"I don't know."

"There you are! The kid hasn't even read

‘Raffles,’ and yet he’s got the cheek to gas about his ‘Golden Treasury’ and Shakespeare.”

“I never mentioned Shakespeare. It was you yourself.”

“Well, ‘The Cloister and the Hearth’ then. Tell me now, truthfully, who are your favourite authors?”

“Oh, come on; I’m going to bed,” said Beach, getting up.

He disappeared into the tent, but Evan and Palmer still sat on by the fire.

## XXIV

"WHY don't you believe me?" Evan began.

Palmer's mood, however, appeared to have altered with Beach's departure. "I do believe you," he said quietly. "I was only rotting. I like books all right myself; but I like doing things better."

Evan drew closer to him, and his voice dropped to a confidential undertone as he asked, "You didn't mean that though—about breaking into a house?"

Palmer watched the play of firelight among the apple branches. "I wanted to hear what Beach thought of it."

"You mean you were only coddling him? Of course, if you did break into a house you'd be sorry for it afterwards:—I mean, you would never feel easy in your mind."

Palmer sat cross-legged and motionless, like an Eastern idol. "The only things I'm sorry for afterwards are the things I *don't* do." He half closed his eyes, like a cat basking in the sun, leaving Evan to ponder these words, which indeed sounded to the younger boy strangely impressive. The doctrine was new to him, and it was alluring.

"When I first got to know you," he said, yielding to the emboldening influences of the

place and of the hour, "I thought you were an awfully peculiar chap:—not a bit like anybody else."

"You think so now, I hope," Palmer replied quickly.

"No—not so much—not in the same way. I know you better now, you see:—I mean, I understand you better."

He busied himself with the fire for a minute or two, throwing on fresh sticks, and gathering others within reach. The swaying, ruddy light shone on his face, and was reflected in his eyes. He looked wonderfully attractive. His beauty had, in this strange light and in these surroundings, a quality that it perhaps in part borrowed from them. At any rate, all that Janet Oulton had objected to had vanished, and he looked now like some young faun who had crept in from the woods, drawn by the bright blaze. Through the night the murmur of water passed, like a voice from the beginning of time.

Palmer watched him, but with a curious coldness. He watched him closely while Evan's attention was diverted; but as soon as Hayes had completed his task a veil of sleepiness seemed to descend over the red-haired boy's eyes. Evan, on the other hand, was extremely wide awake. "How long have you been friends with Beach?" he asked.

"I've known him for a good long time, but I usen't to see very much of him."

"I shouldn't have thought you and he would ever have become chums."

"No?"

"Of course, he's not the same with you as he is with me."

"Probably not." Palmer's interest appeared to languish, but Evan persisted, a note of repressed irritation sounding in his voice.

"He seems to think I'm a sort of kid and have to be looked after."

"I know."

"After all, he's not so very much older than I am."

Palmer yawned. "Perhaps he'll drop it later on."

"I hope so. It's the sort of thing that feeds you up quicker than anything else. He kicked up a row, for instance, because I told him I had played a game of billiards with Cantillon. . . . It wasn't any of his business."

"No."

"Why are you and he so down on Cantillon?"

"Bless your faithful heart, I'm not down on him," exclaimed Palmer, lightly. "If I was, do you think he'd be going about as happily as he is at present? As a matter of fact, Hayes, all that occurred on that particular afternoon was a mistake. You were very wise to keep out of it, and I admired your self-control."

Evan glanced up quickly, with a sudden suspicion that brought the blood to his cheeks, but Palmer's face wore its accustomed expression of rather stupid stolidity. He was reassured. The fact that Dorset should have cared to sit up with him after Beach had gone to bed flattered him.

He felt that they were rapidly growing more intimate, though Dorset, for some reason, had not yet called him by his Christian name, which was rather odd, seeing that Beach never called him by anything else.

"Beach is a queer kind of chap, don't you think?" he ventured.

"You seem to find quite a lot of people queer," said Palmer.

"No; but you know what I mean."

Palmer smiled good-naturedly. "I'm afraid I don't—unless you mean he's queer in the sort of fellows he makes pals of."

"I wasn't thinking of that: I don't know many of his friends."

"You like him, of course?" Palmer suggested absently.

"Oh yes, I like him all right. . . . Only he's not—not what you would call tremendously interesting, is he? I mean—well, he's not a bit like you."

"He's not like either of us."

"And sometimes he's just a little bit dull, don't you think?"

"I shouldn't be surprised."

Evan, who had been more or less feeling his way, felt encouraged. He was glad Beach had left them to themselves. After all, he had been unnecessarily diffident in regard to Dorset. Dorset was not nearly so unapproachable as he had imagined—once you got on the right side of him. In fact, they seemed already to have established confidential relations, and he had an

idea that by the time they had finished their talk they would be fast friends. He was about to make another remark when, to his surprise, Palmer suddenly rose, and yawning elaborately, said, "I think I'll follow Traill's example. I'm getting sleepy again." He looked down at the disconcerted Evan with a faint smile. "Put some more sticks on the fire, Hayes. A fire is supposed to keep away wild beasts, so perhaps it will discourage the rat or the rabbit or whatever it was that attacked you."

He turned round and walked to the tent, leaving Evan all alone.

## XXV

By eleven o'clock on Sunday night Beach was wrapped in profound slumber; a little after midnight he began to dream.

He dreamed that he and Evan were in a boat together. They had no need to row, for the boat glided of itself down a dark, smooth, silent river, under great dim boughs in which extraordinary birds of the brightest colours sat swinging above the water. They floated on and on, in the cool, scented shadow, and then suddenly he saw that what he had taken for a particularly brilliant bird was in reality a monstrous scarlet spider, as big as a tea-tray. Before he could reach the rudder they had floated into the web, and the boat came to rest. The shining eyes of the spider fastened on him. The web floated about him, tickling his face and neck, and the more he tried to brush it away the more he got entangled in it. The tickling increased: he jerked his head from side to side to escape it; and opened his eyes.

"Don't make a row," said a low voice in his ear. "It's me—Palmer." A sudden blinding light was flashed in Beach's face.

The light went out and he felt that he must still be dreaming.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

"An electric torch."

"But why are you here? How did you get in?"

"I got in through a window downstairs. You're not burglar-proof *here*, my bonny boy."

"So you've done it," said Beach, and suddenly he began to laugh.

Palmer clapped a hand over his mouth. "Don't make such a row," he whispered.

"But you *are* an old ass, you know," spluttered Beach. "Imagine going to all that fag just for the pleasure of getting in at a window."

"I wanted to show you I could do it," answered Palmer, a little taken aback by this reception. "But of course your house is too easy. For one thing, it's too big and too empty. A Sunday School treat could get in without your hearing them."

"I hope you haven't taken any swag."

"Not this time. . . . I'll have to trot on now. I've shut the window. I'll go out by the hall door."

Beach was still amused through his sleepiness.

"Why didn't you tell me what you were up to? I'd have got you to go to the Oultons' instead. You could have pinched my photograph for me."

"What photograph?"

"Mummy gave my photograph to Mr Oulton. I don't know what the brute wants with it, but he asked for it and she gave it to him. I'd almost break in there myself to get it back."

"I'll get it for you," said Palmer. He flashed

the electric torch for a moment. "It's only half-past twelve. There's tons of time."

"Oh, rot: I didn't mean it," said Beach, hastily.

"I'll get it all the same. I'll have it for you to-morrow."

"You can't. It wouldn't do." He was thoroughly awake and serious now, for he saw that Palmer was in earnest.

"Why not? It'll save time if I get it to-night instead of to-morrow. I can be at the Oultons' in twenty minutes. Say it takes me half an hour getting in: that means I can be home by half-past one at the latest. I suppose you don't happen to know what room the photograph is in?"

"No, and I wouldn't tell you if I did."

Palmer thought for a moment. "It's probably in the drawing-room."

"I'm sure it isn't," said Beach, regretting extremely that he had ever mentioned it.

"It must be. Oulton can only have asked for it to please your mother. I'm sorry for being so personal, but I really don't think he's keen enough about you to want you for your own sake. He'll have stuck the photograph in the most conspicuous place he can think of, so that your mother will see it every time she calls. It's probably in a silver frame on the drawing-room chimney-piece, or on some little table. Well, good-night. Go to sleep."

"But I say, Dorset, you're not to go." Beach was out of bed now, and had grabbed Palmer by the arm.

"Did you ever know me not to do a thing when I'd said I'd do it?"

"Yes, heaps of times. And you're not going to do this."

"Amn't I?"

"If you do, I'm coming with you," said Beach, switching on the light.

Palmer frowned. "You can't."

"I will." He was already pulling on his shirt and trousers.

"I don't want you," said Palmer.

"That may be; but I'm going if you go."

"We'll be caught."

"It's better for two to be caught than one."

He was half dressed by this time, and Palmer abruptly ceased to argue. "Put on your tennis shoes," he said briefly. "We must make no noise. The door down below is unlocked. If you haven't a latch-key we'll leave it open behind us. You might find some difficulty in getting in."

"I thought you said it was so easy."

"So it is if you know how to manage it; but you don't. . . . Of course, we might leave a window unlatched," he reflected. "That would be the simplest way. . . . Yes, that's what we'll do."

They slipped downstairs, and Palmer arranged a window for Beach's return. "Where is your bike? In the shed?"

"No; in the back hall."

"I'll get it if you wait here. . . . We need it," he added, as he saw Beach on the point of asking questions. "I'll explain later."

Beach waited in the porch, and in a few seconds Palmer joined him there, with the bicycle. All was now easy: they had only to turn off the main path at a short distance from the lodge, climb the wall, and drop down on to the road outside. Palmer climbed first, and Beach handed him up the bicycle. Palmer's own bicycle was hidden in the hedge on the other side of the road. He found it, and they lit their lamps and mounted.

"It will be useful having you," Palmer now admitted. "I didn't think of it at first, but you can keep watch in the garden."

"What am I to watch for in the garden?"

"Oh, just in case anyone should come. If I should happen to get copped I'll make a row, and then you must bunk for all you're worth."

"I see," said Beach, slowly. "In other words you don't really want me to be in the thing at all. But I'm going to be—from start to finish:—either that or else you're going to give it up:—you can take your choice."

"You're an awfully obstinate sort of brute," cried Palmer. "What on earth good will your getting copped do *me*, do you think?"

"Oulton knows me."

"He knows me too."

"Not so well. He's very pally with mummy. And after all it's my photograph we're going for, and I put you up to the whole thing."

"Well, keep quiet; this is the avenue. It's infernally dark. I think we'll get off here and put out the lights. It will be filthy luck if we

run across a bobby now; just at the last moment."

He held Beach by the arm while he listened, but all was quiet. They walked silently down the avenue, wheeling their bicycles, till they reached the Oultons' garden. Then they hid the bicycles in the hedge.

Palmer approached the gate.

"What the nation have they padlocked it for?" he muttered below his breath. "We must climb, and it will be beastly awkward if anything happens and we have to run for it. The hedge is too thick to break through."

He took off his jacket, and, folding it, laid it on the spikes at the top of the gate. He got over without a sound.

Beach followed him, but more clumsily.

"Here, this won't do," said Palmer. "We'll have to get the gate open. The only thing I'm frightened of is that some bobby may know about the padlock and look to see if it's all right. One's nearly sure to pass before we come out again."

He took some steel implement from a little bag in his breast pocket. For not more than a minute he worked in silence: then Beach heard a slight click and Palmer removed the padlock. "Rotten lock!" he briefly ejaculated.

At the same time he produced a mask made of black silk, which he handed to Beach. "Sorry I haven't two, but I didn't know you would be working with me. Put it on."

Beach shook his head, and Palmer, without

pressing him further, tied on the mask himself. It covered the upper part of his face, giving him a villainously professional appearance. "Keep on the grass and follow me closely," he said. "Don't go too near the edge; there may be hoops and things."

He glided towards the house, and Beach followed. In the shadow of some bushes he paused. "Which side is the drawing-room on?"

"Round on the left."

"We'd better get in there, then; it will save time."

Beach's heart was now thumping with excitement. He was nervous, but something in Palmer's cool, methodical manner, and in the way he had picked the padlock, gave him a sort of temporary confidence—not very stable, perhaps, but sufficient to carry him along. He kept his mind glued on the fact that it was Mr Oulton's house; and that, too, helped him a good deal.

Palmer meanwhile, kneeling on the low sill, was trying to force the window latch, but apparently without success. Beach saw him again fumbling inside his jacket before he got to work once more. He heard a low, scraping noise, but could not make out what Dorset was doing.

Presently, with the utmost carefulness, Palmer got down from the sill. In his hand he held something, and Beach, peering closer, saw that it was a little square piece of glass, with a lump of some adhesive substance, probably putty, in the middle. Palmer had cut a hole in the pane.

Somehow, as he watched him laying the glass down, he had a sensation different from, and sharper than, those he had before experienced. This cutting out of a piece of glass seemed, quite illogically, to place the whole escapade on another plane. Beach did not like it. He would himself have admitted that his feeling was childish (for if they *were* going to get in, what matter how they did it?), yet this little action of Palmer's seemed to awaken him for the first time to the full seriousness of what they were attempting.

But it was too late now to draw back. Palmer had already unlatched the window, and was slowly pushing it up. Next moment he had disappeared into the darkness of the room, and Beach prepared to follow. Palmer held aside the blind and the curtain to make it easier for him. The electric torch flashed out.

"I think we'll risk the light," Palmer whispered, stepping to the fireplace. "It's Sunday night, and they're sure to be in bed."

There was the faint scrape of a match, the pop of an incandescent burner, and immediately the room was lit up. Beach was still blinking in the sudden brightness when Palmer turned round, holding up a square, shining object triumphantly. It was a photograph frame.

"Take it," Palmer whispered.

He went to the door and tried it. It was unlocked. He disappeared for a few moments: then he returned to Beach.

"Why have you taken the photograph out of the frame?" he asked.

"Why not? Isn't that what we came for?"

"But you must take the frame too:—it's a silver one."

"What do you mean?"

"Look here. Listen to what I'm going to tell you, and don't interrupt." He spoke rapidly, determinedly, yet always in a whisper. His face had altered curiously; it had grown intent and alert, a little hard; and his eyes shone with a strange light Beach had never seen in them before, or never to the same extent.

"This has to look like a common or garden burglary," he went on. "If you took that photograph without the frame and we bunked now, we'd give the whole show away at once. It's lucky the frame is silver, because that makes it worth taking. But we must do more than that. It would be a very queer kind of burglar who'd break into a house for nothing but a silver frame, with a boy's photograph in it. That won't do. We must gather all the silver things in the room into a heap:—they're not many. Then I'm going to the dining-room. I'll open the sideboard, and if there's any plate in it take it out. Then I'll knock something over,—a lamp, or something, that will make a good deal of noise,—and, the moment you hear it, jump through the window and run for your bike like blazes. But keep on the grass and go quietly, and remember about the hoops at the border. Don't look round for me, but ride for all you're worth: I'll be following you."

"But——"

"It has to be done," said Palmer, very quietly, his eyes fixed on Beach's. "I knew you wouldn't like it, and I did my best to get you not to come."

"You asked me to come," said Beach, "and Evan too."

"That was different: I wasn't going to take anything then."

"All right. I'll not take the photograph, and we'll go at once."

"Rot. I'm going to see the thing through now I've begun. But there's nothing to hinder you from clearing out at once. You might just as well. Your staying here can't possibly help me in any way."

"I'm not going to clear out," said Beach, obstinately.

"Well, don't be a fool about it, then. Can't you see that we won't be taking anything but - this rotten frame, which isn't worth at the most more than ten bob. We'll not be making anything out of it, for the frame will have to be destroyed. If Oulton was to offer to stand you into the theatre, you'd think nothing of it; and this won't cost him as much."

"I wouldn't let him stand me in anywhere. And you know it's not the same at all. Besides, you've broken a window, and now you're going to smash a lamp."

"Only the globe."

"There's no use talking. You'd think I was a baby."

"You're certainly acting like one."

"You can say what you like, but I'm not going to let you do it."

Palmer shrugged his shoulders.

"How can you prevent me? . . . Are you frightened of being copped?"

"It's not that:—though if we *were* copped it would be rotten. I'm not thinking of myself: I'm thinking of mummy. I know exactly what she'd feel about it, and I'm not going to make her feel that simply for your sport."

He had suddenly raised his voice angrily, but Palmer, though he was angry too, spoke in the same low tone he had used all along.

"All right:—then we'd better go. Put back the photograph. I'm willing to risk all that my father would feel," he added plaintively, "but you don't seem to appreciate that."

Beach snorted. "A lot you care what anybody feels."

Palmer suddenly lost patience. "Oh, give me it," he said, snatching the frame from Beach, and putting it back on the table.

He took two steps towards the window, and then abruptly turned and caught Beach by the arm. He had heard the faint sound of an opening gate. He put out the gas and thought quickly. There was the noise of a step on the gravel: then silence. Beach too had heard, and instinctively he waited for Palmer to decide what they must do.

Palmer remained motionless. He felt sure that if he were alone he could make his escape, but he was equally sure Beach would be caught.

He listened intently, but could hear nothing except the fussy, irritating ticking of the drawing-room clock, and Beach's breathing. "He's coming to the window," he said.

"If I go to the hall door will you bunk as soon as you hear him run round there?" he whispered into Beach's ear. "You'll hear him on the gravel."

"I'll not bunk without you," Beach replied.

Still the silence persisted.

Palmer was absolutely certain that whoever they had heard was now just outside the window. His hot lips again pressed against Beach's ear. "It must be Oulton himself. If it was anyone else he'd have given an alarm. He doesn't know what to do. He must be alone, and of course he thinks we're men, or at any rate one man, and he's frightened to come in for fear of getting a bash on the head. If he goes for a peeler that's our chance. But he won't go, because he knows we know he's there. When he saw the gas turned out he'd guess that. He'll wait till he hears a bobby and then he'll shout. Is there a way out at the back?"

"Only through the yard, and the door is on the side where he is."

"What about Miles? Do you know which is his room? He might see us through if we told him. Does young Tom sleep in the same room?"

"He does. And I'm not going to ask Miles, anyway."

"Then we'd better try the yard. I believe Oulton's in as big a funk as we are. . . . Only

he's not that sort—is he? I don't think he'd funk a burglar, or even two of them." He was silent for an instant; then he whispered, "Don't stir till I come back."

Beach heard nothing, and in the darkness he saw nothing; he only knew that Palmer had left him. But waiting in that uncanny silence alone was more trying than it had been when Palmer was with him, and it seemed that hours went by before he felt a hand gripping his arm. He could not repress a violent start, and, in moving back, his foot kicked against a chair. But no sound came from outside. He felt Palmer's lips again at his ear. "When I pull you, follow me. We're going out by the window. Whatever you do, don't make a noise now."

Beach waited. His mouth felt hot and dry, and his legs curiously weak. He was sure he *should* make a noise. If he had been alone he would there and then either have made a bolt for it, or have given himself up. Presently, through the dark stillness, he heard a faint sound at the hall door, as if the latch had been pulled back.

He was hardly conscious of anything after that, except that Palmer was guiding him across the room, that they were out of the window and skulking along in the shadow of the shrubbery. More by good fortune than anything else, he succeeded in moving quietly as he followed Palmer's lead. They reached the hedge at last and began to skirt it. They reached the gate, which was open. They were in the avenue.

Palmer had the bicycles out of the hedge in an instant.

“Put your head down and *ride*,” he said grimly.

They heard now the sound of someone running, of Mr Oulton’s voice raised as he gave the alarm ; but they were out of sight before he reached the gate.

“Go home ; I’m going the other way,” Palmer hissed ; and he turned to the left without slackening speed, as they flew out of the avenue on to the main road.

## XXVI

WHAT a night! Awakening in the morning, Beach instantly remembered it all. He dressed hurriedly, for he wanted to see Palmer as soon as possible, and discuss the matter with him.

He came down to breakfast, his mind simmering with repressed excitement, his head filled with last night's exploit and their brilliant escape: It was a kind of torture to him to have nobody to whom he could so much as mention these things. He did not himself entirely understand that escape: in fact, when he came to consider it, he did not understand it at all. How had Palmer known that Mr Oulton was going round to the hall door? The whole thing was mystifying in the highest degree, and he burned to get the true explanation.

Mrs Traill was already at the table when he came in, and he looked at her with bright eyes as he took his seat. His manner was peculiar—a blend of incoherence and—when he remembered to put it on—of a studied nonchalance in reality more likely to attract than divert attention. He was in fact waiting, in a state of acute suspense, for news of the burglary, which he thought must arrive before long, and the idea that, when it did arrive, his face might betray him, added to his general restlessness.

Breaking in, in a most startling fashion, upon his preoccupation, came the sound of his mother's voice. "What's the matter, dear? Why aren't you eating a proper breakfast?"

He knew he looked guilty as he hurriedly replied, "I—I'm not hungry."

"Don't you feel well?"

"Yes; I'm all right."

"You don't *look* all right."

Mrs Traill seemed suddenly to have developed an alarming and unwelcome inquisitiveness. "There's something strange about you. I asked you twice if you would have some more coffee and you didn't even hear me."

Beach apologised. Though he had not heard about the coffee, he was painfully aware even at that moment of the tinkle of the telephone bell, and repressed with difficulty an impulse to rush to the receiver. Fidgeting in his chair, he glanced uneasily at his mother, and was horrified to find her eyes fixed upon him. Mrs Traill was only wondering if he really *were* quite well, but, to Beach's guilty conscience, her gaze had a penetrating and speculative quality which he sought to baffle by an air of profound indifference. He whistled a bar or two till his mother's astonished face reminded him that this was a rather unusual way to behave at the breakfast table, and he found himself apologising again. His heart was beating noisily. Then he heard the servant coming with the message, and found a temporary refuge by dropping his fork and fumbling after it under the table.

"You're wanted at the telephone, Master Beach."

He jumped up, nearly upsetting his chair, but he felt for the time at least out of danger. It must of course be Palmer; and he wondered why he had not himself thought of ringing up his chum.

"Hello!" he called eagerly. "That you, Palmer?"

But the voice which replied sent a chill through his vitals, leaving him with a curious and rather ghastly feeling of emptiness.

"No, it's not Palmer. It is Mr Oulton. Can you call at my office on your way to school this morning?"

"I—I'm rather late," Beach answered faintly.

"I will write a note to your master explaining that I kept you. It is important that I should see you as soon as possible. When can you be here?"

There was an agonised pause, and then Beach accepted the inevitable. "I'll come now—on the bike."

"All right. Good-bye."

## XXVII

HE rang off, and Beach stared very hard at the little brown square box before him. "He *can't* have guessed," he thought almost aloud. "It's impossible. But on the other hand he must have; for what else can he mean?" He went back to his mother, but said nothing about Mr Oulton, and as soon as he could he hurried away.

Mr Oulton's office was at the corner of Wellington Place, quite close to Osborne, and on arriving Beach was shown at once into a private room where Mr Oulton himself, who had evidently been waiting for him, stood by the bare fireplace. He nodded to the boy and said good-morning.

He did not offer to shake hands, however (a sign that something serious was the matter), and, while he looked at him, Beach seemed all at once to understand how it was that Miles was afraid of his uncle.

Yet he neither stormed nor blustered. He was, indeed, if anything, quieter than usual as he lifted two objects from the chimney-piece. "I have two things here which I believe are your property," he remarked dispassionately. "One is a knife: the other appears to be a fishing line." He held them out as he spoke, and Beach

stared at them, though he only recognised the knife.

He remembered now having used it to take out the photograph. He must have laid it down somewhere and forgotten it. It had his name on it, too (cut on the little steel plate); that was how Mr Oulton had been able to identify it. But the fishing line bewildered him.

"That isn't mine," he said. "I don't know anything about it."

"Why deny it?" asked Mr Oulton, suavely. "As evidence it doesn't commit you to anything further:—the knife is enough. It is the line you attached so ingeniously to the hall door. As you know, it answered its purpose. I went round to the door, leaving you to get out by the window. I confess, when I discovered the trick, I was considerably surprised. It was very cunning, and if it was your own idea showed a resourcefulness which was quite admirable. . . . Yes," he went on thoughtfully, "the line surprised me. It surprises me still. I had formed an opinion of you with which it doesn't in the least fit in. I don't think it fits in with anybody's opinion of you. In fact, I am inclined to doubt if it was your own invention. But sit down."

Beach obeyed.

"Now, tell me why you did this—this peculiar thing."

"I did it to get my photograph back."

Across Mr Oulton's face there passed a curious expression. He even flushed slightly.

"You were aware, of course, that you were

committing a criminal action—one that rendered you liable to a term of imprisonment with hard labour?"

"Yes."

"And for the sake of a photograph—which you could have asked for if you had wanted it—you ran this risk?"

"Yes."

Mr Oulton cleared his throat, but the boy in the chair looked at him steadily.

"I suppose you don't believe me?"

"On the contrary, I believe you up to a certain point. That is to say, I fancy you have told me the truth, but not all of it. The photograph very likely was part of your reason."

"What other reason could I have?"

"Principally, a desire to annoy me—a desire to injure my property, let us say—to damage some furniture perhaps, or cut up a picture:—there are a great many ways in which one can satisfy a grudge."

"I didn't want to do anything of the sort," cried Beach, indignantly. "I only wanted the photograph."

Mr Oulton smiled. "You must pardon me, but that is rather hard to believe."

"Why?"

"I suppose, because it is hard to imagine a perfectly sane and normal person going to such risk and trouble for anything so trivial."

"You think I'm a liar, then?"

"After last night's performance I hardly know what to think of you."

Beach swallowed down the words that rose to his lips. "I'm sorry about last night," he said, after a very lengthy pause, and it cost him a considerable effort to bring himself to say it. "I know I shouldn't have done it, but—I didn't see it at the time just in the way I do now. And I've told you the truth, whether you care to believe me or not. I'm sorry—really."

"Were you sorry while you thought you were safe?"

Beach was silent again. At last he said, "Look here; couldn't you give me a licking or something? I'd rather you did."

Mr Oulton ignored this proposal. "Apart altogether from what concerns me," he went on, "did it not occur to you that there were other people to be considered? My sister-in-law fortunately had taken a sleeping draught; otherwise it is almost certain you would have awakened her, for she is a poor sleeper. If she had heard you, she would have been very much frightened; in fact, in her present state of health, the shock might have been extremely serious."

"We didn't make any noise," answered Beach, quickly.

Mr Oulton looked at him in silence. He knew Beach was unaware of the slip he had just made, and he did not point it out to him. But he said, after a short pause, "I feel sure you were not alone. The more I think of it, the more impossible it seems to me that it was you who picked the padlock, took out the piece of glass,

arranged the whole scene, so to speak, and then played the trick at the end by which you were able to get away. You accused me a few minutes ago of not believing you. I should like to ask you this one thing:—*Was* there anybody with you when you broke into the house?"

Beach did not reply.

"Well, I needn't keep you. I'm not so foolish as to imagine that any advice I might give you would have the least effect. At home they think a real attempt was made to burgle the house. For your mother's sake I shall leave them with that impression. Possibly, indeed, after our last little affair, you may have counted upon this. At all events, I have communicated with the police, and the house will be watched. I was obliged to do this to reassure my sister-in-law, who is very nervous, but I shall say nothing to anybody else."

He gave Beach no time to reply; but rang a bell on his desk, and almost immediately a clerk came in.

## XXVIII

THE boy went out, feeling that his enemy had scored heavily. What made it worse was that the episode so repeated that of the boat, particularly in the detail of imposed secrecy. But this time he was going to tell:—that is, if Dorset would allow him to, for the secret was as much Dorset's as his. He related the whole thing to Palmer between first and second, and second and third periods, but Palmer accepted the situation with more philosophy than Beach. His entire interest, indeed, appeared to be confined to the fact that his scheme would have worked beautifully had it not been for the incriminating penknife, and for the penknife, of course, he was in no wise responsible. This, apparently, brought him sufficient solace, and he showed himself lamentably callous in regard to Mrs Oulton's nerves, or any moral aspect of the case. That afternoon he walked home with Beach, and as soon as Evan had left them, they began the discussion anew. It was obvious that Beach looked to his chum for guidance, though their points of view were so different, and Palmer's so unsatisfactory. For about the twentieth time he asked, "What do you think we ought to do? We can't possibly leave things as they are."

"You've said that pretty often," Palmer replied

unsympathetically, "but it doesn't seem to get you much further on."

"Well, why don't *you* say something, then, instead of leaving it all to me?"

"What's the use of saying things, if you can't *do* anything? All we can do now is to pay for the broken window. . . . But I've written your friend a letter."

"My friend?"

"Oulton."

Beach's eyes grew wide with astonishment. "You have? When?"

His tone was not one of approbation, and it was still less appreciative as he asked, "Was that the letter you posted on the way up?"

"Yes. I wonder how much a pane of glass like that costs? It can hardly be more than ten bob."

"What did you put in the letter, and why didn't you tell me you were writing? I wish you wouldn't do things in the dark that way. I hate it, and you're always doing them."

Palmer seemed quite undisturbed by his displeasure. "I thought it would save time. We'll send him fifteen bob:—that's bound to be more than enough."

"I'm going to pay for it," cried Beach, at once.

"You're going to pay your half."

"I'm going to pay it all."

"Well, it doesn't much matter," said Palmer, cynically. "He's certain to send it back."

Beach turned on him quickly. "If I thought that!—"

Palmer shrugged his shoulders. "Don't think it if it annoys you."

"Tell me what you said in your letter. I don't see why you wanted to write at all. It won't do any good your giving yourself away."

"I thought of that. But it can't do much harm, and it may mollify him slightly. Confessions seem to have that effect:—I don't know why."

"Tell me what you said."

Palmer drew from the inside pocket of his jacket a page torn from an exercise book. It was the rough draft of his letter, and he read it aloud.

"DEAR MR OULTON,—I want to tell you that I was the other person concerned in the affair at your house on Sunday night. We did the thing for a rag, and not because we felt any ill-feeling towards you, or had any wish to injure your property. As a matter of fact, I was responsible for the whole thing, and did it all. Beach Traill said everything he could against it, and joined in simply because he didn't want to leave me alone, and because it was his photograph we were after. But really we didn't do any harm except to the window pane, and it was all a kind of joke. You know my father, I daresay, and you must see how improbable it is that a professor of philosophy could have a son who is the sort of boy one sends to a Borstal Institution. As for Beach Traill, he was dead against it. He says he has apologised for his share in the matter,

and I now do the same. We are both frightfully sorry, and of course intend to pay for the damage done to the window. In fact, I would enclose a postal order now if I had one, or the money to go out and buy one. We will send it eventually, however, without fail, and as soon as possible. In the meantime we greatly appreciate the sporting attitude you have taken up in the matter, because we know you could have made it pretty hot for us if you had wanted to. With best wishes, yours faithfully,

PALMER DORSET.

"P.S.—I should be much obliged if you would burn this letter as soon as you have read it.—P. D."

"It's a jolly good letter," Beach admitted, while Palmer, as if to set Mr Oulton an example, struck a match and burnt the copy. "All except the bit about appreciating his sporting attitude. There was nothing sporting about his attitude. He wouldn't have kept the thing quiet if it hadn't suited him to do so. Damn him, that's the second thing he's kept quiet."

Palmer at this pricked up his ears. "Oh?" he said inquisitively.

"You needn't be 'oh-ing', for I'm not going to tell you about it. He made me promise not to."

"Well, I think we should give him the benefit of the doubt."

"There isn't any doubt. If he had caught you instead of me you would jolly soon have seen how much doubt there was."

"You only think that because you hate him. Whatever the man had done or said you would have thought the same."

"I wouldn't."

"Well, that was my letter, anyway. You can write another if you like, and stick whatever you want in it."

"I wouldn't have let you write at all if I had known. . . . Thanks awfully, all the same."

"It was of course against my principles to write," Palmer admitted. "It's idiotic to put yourself in anyone's power. I know Oulton's quite safe, but still, as a matter of principle——"

They had almost reached the house, and Beach asked, "Would you mind if I told mummy?"

"I'd mind very much indeed," Palmer answered promptly. "What do you want to tell her for?"

"I don't want to be under an obligation to Oulton."

"Oh, blow you and your obligations! First there's Ledgy, and now there's Oulton. If I let you tell your mother you'll be under an obligation to me."

"I don't mind about you. Look here, Dorset, I know you'll think it silly; but he swelled so much about not telling mummy——"

"You only imagine that. As I tell you, you're incapable of doing the man justice. What was there to swell about? But I don't care; do as you like."

"I daresay I'll have to bring you into it."

"I don't very well see how you can keep me out, unless you're going to lie pretty freely."

But remember, you're not to tell anybody else."

"Of course not. I don't want to tell anybody else."

"You will very soon, though. You'll want to tell young Hayes."

"If I did it wouldn't matter."

"It would. It's not as if we had brought the thing off. Nobody likes having their failures advertised all over the show."

"I'll make mummy promise not to say a word about it to a soul."

"Well, she's going out now. There's the car coming round for her."

"We'll catch her before she goes."

They did, and Mrs Traill was sworn to secrecy. The two boys stood before her, and she looked from one to the other—Beach eager and very much in earnest; Palmer equally grave, but with a peculiar glint in his small brown eyes that made her feel rather doubtful about him.

"What have you been doing?" she demanded peremptorily.

"Remember you've promised not to mention the matter to *anyone*."

"I know I've promised. I'm sorry now I did."

Her gaze seemed to concentrate itself more especially upon Palmer. She could not be sure, but she imagined that Palmer's left eyelid had quivered ever so slightly, and that the quiver had been intended for her. If so, she decided that he was extraordinarily impertinent.

Beach plunged into his story pell-mell, though

some instinct made him blur over the matter of the photograph. The photograph no longer appeared in its true light, as a motive for their strange outburst; it was only to be a trophy of the accomplished deed.

Mrs Traill listened to him with increasing amazement and vexation. "But how did Palmer come to be here at all?" she demanded, interrupting him.

Beach had quite forgotten this earlier episode, and now it too had to be explained. He related exactly what had taken place, even the original conversation by the camp fire.

Mrs Traill's eyes, throughout, were fastened upon Palmer's face, though she failed to discover in it any but the most perfunctory signs of contrition. She was sure she ought to be even more angry with him than she actually felt, for she was perfectly convinced that the whole thing had been his doing from beginning to end. But she had always liked Palmer, and she still continued to like him. At the same time, his friendship with Beach, the influence he evidently had over Beach, made her uneasy. For she was quite unable to cope with Palmer. He was only a boy, but the masculine element in him was so undiluted that she knew she would never be certain in her reading of him. And it was this she liked (this masculine element), this that, even through her present doubts and uneasiness, appealed to her. His self-possession baffled her; the frank and unabashed gaze which returned her own, without any suggestion of rudeness,

but equally without timidity. Beach she knew thoroughly, she knew what he was thinking and feeling at this moment; but Palmer's mental attitude seemed to be simply one of curiosity as to what point of view she herself should decide to take.

"I don't understand," she said. "I can't even understand what made you *want* to do such a thing. And I'm sure it was all Palmer's fault."

"It wasn't," Beach interposed. "I was as much in it as he was."

"Do keep quiet, Beach, and stop talking nonsense. As if I didn't know that left to yourself you would be incapable of doing such a thing."

"If you're going to blame Dorset for it, I'm sorry I told you."

"Why shouldn't I blame him? He knows himself that what I say is true. And at any rate he doesn't care a fig whether I blame him or not. Not that I don't blame you, too," she added immediately. "It seems to me you both deserve—I don't know what. But if you had been poor boys, who after all have some excuse for doing wrong, you would probably have been birched, or else sent to prison. . . . As for Mr Oulton, I don't know how I shall ever be able to look him in the face again, or what I'm to say to him."

"You promised to say nothing," Beach reminded her quickly.

"Nonsense! Of course I must say something—especially as he knows already."

"But you promised—you promised," cried Beach.

Palmer, with his back to the window and his hands in his pockets, at this point intervened. "Beach took you at your word," he said quietly.

Mrs Traill felt really angry now. "And why shouldn't he take me at my word?" she demanded sharply. "Didn't you?"

Palmer made no answer, and his silence, with its unspoken tolerance of feminine inconsistency, made her want to box his ears. She turned her back on him and addressed her concluding words to Beach. "I'll not say anything: but I'm very vexed and very disappointed."

He knew to what she was alluding, and that his action had, in effect, amounted to a breach of faith, but that aspect of the affair had at the time not occurred to him.

"I must go now," Mrs Traill wound up, in the same tone of extreme displeasure. "You've kept me late as it is."

Palmer opened the door for her, and she rustled out between them, leaving both boys with the sense that they had somehow managed to make things worse rather than better, though how this result had been brought about they quite failed to comprehend.



## INTERMEZZO

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### XXIX

EVAN and Beach had left home soon after breakfast, and had tramped for a couple of hours along hilly, dusty roads. It was a hot still day towards the end of August. The hay was cut and the corn was ready for cutting; the fields were yellow with ripe corn, or with the stubble left by the reapers after the harvest had been gathered into stacks. The berries in the hedges were ripening; a burning sun was reflected back by the hard, crumbling earth; and, in the distance, the sky seemed to melt into a bluish, tremulous vapour that veiled the horizon.

The day grew more breathless as the morning advanced. The whole landscape had now assumed that peculiar mat aspect which is the presage of unusual heat. The dark, purple mass of Knockglade seemed half dissolved into the sky; not a blade of grass trembled; the corn stood motionless; and the red slender poppies were still as painted flowers.

The two boys lingered and loitered. They bathed, and dawdled over their lunch. They climbed the low hill behind Carrick-a-rede, and

lay among the bronze-green fragrant heather, listening to the drone of vagrant bees, and to the sleepy murmur which rose from far below, where the small waves curled over and fell on a narrow strip of glittering beach.

It was three o'clock. They sat up and talked of a second bathe. Beneath them a tongue of grass-topped rocks jutted out into the water, and on the left of this was an amphitheatre of low chalk cliffs—white, dazzlingly white in the sun.

The gulls, drifting out in ever increasing numbers over the blue, wrinkled sea, were whiter still. They were white with the soft whiteness of foam or snow. These birds, and the two boys, were the only living creatures visible in all that wide expanse of sea and land and sky; and the birds were like spirits from some arctic world, who had flown into the summer. They were free and beautiful, detached beings hovering on the fringe of the earth, bright as angels. They wheeled over the water, and suddenly uniting, dropped in a compact flock among the foam in the shallows, filling the air with a harsh exultant crying, ceaseless, eager, voracious.

"There must be a shoal of fish there," said Beach, sitting up, and shading his eyes with his hand. "It's queer how the fish come in like that, for about five minutes, and then go out to sea again. If we had rods now, and were out on those rocks, we could catch them by the dozen. . . . Look, the gulls are following them." The birds had risen like a drift of snow, and were

circling over the darker, deeper water. Their cries grew less frequent, less eager, and finally ceased. Silence descended again—a silence filled with elusive, coloured enchantments. In a minute or two it seemed as if it had never been broken.

“Four more days,” said Evan, drowsily, “and then we’ll have left all this behind us . . . and it will never come again.”

“How do you know? Summer will come again, and we may come back too.”

“Not *this* summer, and not we as we are now.”

Beach lifted a handful of warm dry earth and let it run through his fingers, an unintentional symbol of human life. Evan’s philosophy did not appeal to him, did not, moreover, in the least convince him. “I don’t see why there should be much difference,” he said.

“There’s always a difference. Nothing ever happens again. I wonder what becomes of things? If you try to, you can see the old used days blowing away like withered leaves. Perhaps they’re like magic-lantern slides, and are put into a box somewhere; or like a cinematograph film that unrolls and unrolls for ever. Or perhaps everything moves round in a circle.”

“Then we’ll come back again.”

“And we must have been back time after time before. You see, it won’t work out in any direction. There can’t be any beginning, and there can’t be any end.”

“But why?”

“Well, just try to imagine it. There’s always

something beyond, something left over:—it's a horrible feeling."

"What is?"

"The feeling of endlessness. You get a glimpse of it. It comes with a kind of shock, all at once; and then something in your mind stops, just like a broken spring, and the whole thing is gone. Haven't you ever felt like that?"

"But things *must* have had a beginning. Besides, it tells you about it in the Bible."

"It doesn't really. It only gives you a sort of yarn, like people tell to kids when they ask awkward questions."

Beach was a little startled. He had never doubted the literal truth of all that was written in the Bible; he had never given it any thought at all. "Don't you believe it?" he asked.

"No; it's nonsense. I read a book, just before I came down here, called 'The Mistakes of Moses,' and it proved that nearly everything Moses said about the creation was wrong. Things couldn't have happened in the way he says they did. I knew they couldn't even before I had read that book."

"But you're not an atheist, are you?"

"I'm an agnostic," answered Evan.

"A what?"

"An agnostic. It means a person who doesn't either believe or disbelieve. He simply says he doesn't know. Nearly all scientific men, and philosophers—people like Herbert Spencer and the author of 'The Mistakes of Moses'—are agnostics. I expect Palmer Dorset's father is one."

"He isn't. He goes to church every Sunday. And he takes down the sermon in shorthand no matter how rotten it is. Palmer jolly well has to go too. You wouldn't catch old Dorset saying he didn't know things. He's a clever old boy."

Evan gave him a rather pitying look. "You don't seem to understand. It doesn't mean that you're ignorant. It means that you only believe what can be proved. You surely don't think Professor Dorset is cleverer than Herbert Spencer and the author of 'The Mistakes of Moses!'"

Beach accepted the correction, but he began to think out slowly this fresh proposition. "There are lots of things that are true which I couldn't prove," he presently remarked. "I couldn't prove that the sun goes round the earth, for instance."

"It doesn't."

"Well, the other way then—you know what I mean."

"You mayn't be able to prove it, but astronomers can."

"How do you know, then, that somebody can't prove Moses was right?"

"Because the other chap proves he was wrong. A thing can't be both right and wrong. You can't have it both ways. The sea is either salt or it isn't. If this fellow proves that Moses was talking rot, that's an end of it."

"But you couldn't prove that——" Beach searched for an example—"that it was a rotten thing to bully some chap smaller than yourself."

"You could:—and besides, anyone can see it is."

"How do you know a fellow like Cantillon can? There doesn't seem to me to be much difference between bullying and hunting, or shooting for sport, and yet precious few people seem able to see that."

"One's natural and the other isn't."

"It's natural to Cantillon."

"But not to the majority."

"Then all that makes a thing right is that it happens to be natural to the majority? And if the majority were like Cantillon it would be right to bully and be a general rotter?"

"I suppose so."

"Well, I don't believe it. If you take Spain, the majority of people there want to have bull-fights, but that doesn't make it any the less beastly to have them."

"It makes it legal."

"That isn't what you started off by saying."

"Well, hang it, you can't expect to get an absolute rule."

"There must be an absolute rule:—at least, about some things. There are the things mentioned in the Commandments."

Evan was silent. He appeared to be wondering whether these, also, might not be among poor Moses's mistakes. "Even if you take the Commandments," he said at last, "it is all right to murder, if you do it in a wholesale way, the way people do in war; or to steal, if it's a matter of bagging territory; or to work on Sundays, if your work happens to be convenient to other people, like engine-drivers' and tramway-men's

is. And nobody thinks very much about taking the Lord's name in vain, or about coveting. It's right for Catholics to make graven images, and it's wrong for Protestants. That leaves only about three Commandments out of the lot."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I don't know. . . . It's not that you don't *hear* plenty about it all. I have to go to two services and one Bible-class every Sunday; but it never really gets much beyond telling you that certain things are wrong and others right, and the wrong ones seem to be those everybody wants to do. But, if they are wrong, why should people want to do them? If you take those seagulls there, they seem to manage well enough, and yet I'm sure they steal and do everything else."

Beach too had been watching the seagulls. "I was just thinking how jolly they were," he said. He thought a moment. "And you've just contradicted your argument. For, if the majority want to do wrong, then wrong must be right."

"I said the parson told you they did; I didn't say it *was* so."

"Well, I don't think there's much difficulty if you don't think about it. At any rate, I always know myself if I've done anything rotten. . . . Let's go out on to the head. You've never been across the bridge."

They began to scramble down the hillside, but, as they drew nearer the famous rope bridge, Evan's pace slackened. He had heard about it, about the swinging planks and the hand-rail

that consisted of a single rope, and he wondered if he should be able to face it. He had manufactured several excuses earlier in the day for putting off this part of their expedition, but he saw now that the time had come when he must either cross or refuse to do so. He followed Beach.

It was quite easy. It had, in fact, been altered and made easier by the slinging of a double rope and the widening of the planks. He was thankful he had not made a fool of himself by funking it. Beach declared that it had been spoiled.

On the other side, the long thin dry grass formed an immense matted bed, amazingly thick, slippery, and springy. They lay down on the grass and looked out over the sea, Beach's mind still ruminating the problems Evan had suggested. His mind moved slowly; his brain was much less nimble than Evan's; but possibly a Socrates might have found it easier to have drawn from it what he sought.

For a long time they lay there. A heavy, yellowish bank of cloud had floated up, unnoticed, behind them, and Evan, chancing to turn round, watched it with uneasiness.

"It looks like thunder," he said at last to Beach, but Beach made no reply.

In a few minutes, however, he also sat up, and, clasping his hands about his knees, gazed at the cloud, which had now blotted out the sun.

"We'll watch it from here," he exclaimed. "A fine storm would be simply ripping out here."

Evan's face showed his apprehension. "But we'll be drenched," he said weakly.

"I expect so."

The first warm drops were already splashing on them, and Beach took off his straw hat. He liked to feel the rain on his head and on his forehead. "We'd be drenched, anyway, long before we could reach shelter, so we might as well stay here."

The rain was whipping the sea, the big drops making a pattering sound like hail; and sea and land and sky had grown dark and unfamiliar. Suddenly, through the gloom, a bright tongue of flame spat out at them from the livid clouds. Evan started violently. The thunder broke above their heads in a magnificent din, like the clattering of immense brazen dishes on the stone floor of some giant's palace. It reverberated among the rocks, the echoes rumbling and growling. Evan repressed a desire to put his fingers in his ears.

There was another flash and another. Beach, glancing sidelong at him, saw that Evan's face was strained and pale. It had not occurred to him that he would be frightened, and he was sorry. It was his fault too, because, if they had started at once, when Evan had first suggested it, they might have reached the cottage before the storm broke. He moved closer to him and put his arm round his shoulder. "I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know you minded. Shall we go now?"

Evan shook his head. It had been obvious

enough, he thought bitterly, that he had not wanted to stay; but Beach never understood anything until it was too late.

"I think we're really better here," Beach went on, unconscious of his friend's resentment. "It can't last long, and if we went now we'd have to cross the bridge in the middle of it all."

A clap of thunder drowned his last words. The rain, as if released from some burst cloud, swept over them in a deluge. The lightning sprang out, clean and splendid, seeming to leap from horizon to horizon, no malignant instrument of wrath, but a divine plaything, dangerous and beautiful. Beach sat gazing at the wonderful scene. At each flash the white rocks shone out with a splendid vividness, and the entire landscape was transformed:—he could hear the scream of witches above the thunder. With his hand on Evan's shoulder, he could feel the nervous tremor that ran through his body, the start with which he recoiled from every flash, and that protective instinct, which had coloured all his friendship, sprang up anew.

But at its height the storm lasted only for a short time, and already it was passing. The rumbling of thunder still continued to sound in the distance, but the rain had ceased, and presently the sun came out. Wet to the skin, they made their way as rapidly as possible over the drenched slippery grass and across the bridge, and climbed the steep ascent to the cottage above. Here, in borrowed garments, they sat before a turf fire in the kitchen, while

their clothes were hung up to dry by an old woman, who made them very welcome. She talked to them about her son, who was a sailor; she gave them tea and soda-bread and butter; and it was evening when they started, comfortable inside and out, on their homeward journey.

The air was still very mild, but the storm had washed the sultriness out of it, leaving it fresh and pleasant. The sun was nearly down, and all the western sky was streaked with delicate silvery-green clouds, and flooded with a soft and fading light. There was a sound of running water where the rain had filled the shallow channels at the road side; the scented hedgerows mingled their fragrance with the salt smell of the sea.

The two boys had a walk of several miles before them, but they did not hurry. They leaned over gates, and sat on low walls, while the dusk grew deeper, and the silver moon more bright. Their talk was fragmentary, broken by many silences; but when they were a little more than half way home Evan said, "I'm sorry for being such a fool."

Beach knew what he meant, but he had not expected the subject to be revived. It was not the sort of thing he found it easy to talk about. He had understood:—Evan surely knew that. He thought he had shown at the time that he had understood. "You're not a fool at all," he answered quietly.

"Well—a funk then."

"Lots of people don't like thunder."

Evan looked at him, but Beach's eyes were fixed on the road that stretched before them, pale and slender, winding through the darkened landscape like a white thread.

"You *must* think me a coward. You saw it this afternoon, and you'd seen it before—that day when Cantillon—— Dorset knows it too."

"It doesn't matter what Dorset thinks."

"I'd rather you wouldn't say that. I'd rather you talked about it—as it really seems to you. I couldn't talk about it myself, as a rule, but just now, somehow, I can; and I want to—if you don't mind."

Beach was silent. There seemed to him to be nothing to say. It was not the sort of thing one mentioned:—not even to one's chum.

"If you take this afternoon," said Evan. "I couldn't help it. I don't know what it was: but I know it wasn't just that I was afraid of being killed. I mean, supposing I were told I should die to-morrow, or were given some poison to drink, like Socrates was, I wouldn't be afraid the way I was this afternoon. I wouldn't be more afraid, I think, than anyone else. But this other thing—— I felt it even before the storm began. That's why I wanted to go. I didn't care a straw about getting wet."

"But you stayed."

"I stayed because I funked telling you I was afraid of thunder. It's the same all through. It's rotten. Sometimes I forget about it, but things are always happening to remind me.

And I try to imagine myself doing something big (the way it happened in a book I read), something that would wipe all these other things out: but I know well enough really that if I got a chance I wouldn't take it. . . . Even in dreams I never can. I've dreamt of things happening—sometimes real things like that of Cantillon—sometimes imaginary ones—and I always do just what I would if I were awake. I put up with whatever it is, with whatever is done to me. I can't help it. Even when I get angriest there's always something that stops me. . . . It's what I admire most about Dorset—the way he doesn't seem to care about anything or anyone. Do you remember when he suggested breaking into a house? I believe if we had backed him up he really would have done it."

"You don't want to break into houses, do you?"

"I'd like to feel that I could do it if it had to be done. I'd like to be like Palmer Dorset."

"Dorset is exceptional."

Evan did not press the point further, and it was Beach himself who, a little later, reopened the subject.

"Don't you think it's more or less a matter of—of getting used to things? If you once broke the ice, I mean—you'd be all right. Supposing you had a fight or two next term? I'll teach you to box, and that will help you a lot. If you licked two or three chaps, it would give you a sort of confidence, and then you'd be all right—in things of that sort at least. You

have to be able to stand up for yourself, because, if you can't, fellows will soon get to know about it, and then they won't give you any peace. They'll always be ragging you and annoying you,—that is, some of them will,—even the kids."

"But how is it that a chap like Dorset never has to stand up for himself?"

"Oh, he has had two or three fights. I saw him getting badly licked once, only he wouldn't admit it, and the other chap, who was too big for him, refused to go on. Of course, that was some time ago. You see, he's so absolutely cock-sure of himself that even if he were half killed he'd still imagine the other fellow must be worse."

"Well, I've told you," said Evan, with a sudden bitterness. "I've told you what you knew before."

"Your telling me makes me a good deal less sure of it," Beach answered.

And this was true. Already within his mind a mysterious force was at work, a spirit which readjusted things, arranging them swiftly and silently to a new pattern, hiding some, dragging others into the light, adding a touch here, a touch there, till its kindly task was completed.

Yet he had a vague feeling that Evan now regretted having spoken. This feeling was confirmed by the next remark he made—a remark which, somehow, threw everything out of tune, and jarred on Beach in a way no betrayal of timidity could have. "You won't say anything about it, will you?" Evan asked.

Beach gave him the required assurance.

## PART II

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### XXX

THEY were in Beach's room at home when Palmer Dorset flung open the door. "Sorry for being late, but I couldn't come any sooner. What's the matter?"

Beach and Evan were seated at the table. Beach had in front of him a blotting-pad, a pile of white paper, and several ink bottles, with a pen already dipped in one of them. He got to business at once, rapping the table sharply. "Take a pew, Dorset. Not over there," for Palmer as usual was gravitating to the window-seat. "You must sit with us."

"Oh rot. I'm all right here."

"You're not. This is a committee meeting—the first meeting of the Workers' Club."

Palmer having arranged the cushions, stretched himself upon them and yawned.

"Before fixing the rules and things," said Beach, "I shall call upon Mr Evan Hayes to give the members an account of the various objects for which this club was founded."

"He needn't bother," answered Palmer. "You wrote to me about it. As far as I can see there's

only one object, and that is to do your 'swot for you."

"It isn't. But if you don't want to hear about the club we can pass on to other business. I suppose I may as well take the chair."

"Why?" asked Palmer.

"Why not?"

"The chairman must be elected. I propose that Mr Palmer Dorset takes the chair. Anybody second that?" He stared at Evan.

"The chairman has already been proposed and seconded," said Beach. "The meeting began before you came in. . . . I say, come to the table, can't you."

"No. I'm going to stay here."

The chairman cleared his throat. "Well;—perhaps after all I'd better begin by stating the objects for which this club was——"

"Didn't I tell you we knew them already, fat-head? What's the use of wasting time?"

"The main idea," pursued Beach, "is to encourage the various members to work."

"Hear, hear!"

"We feel that work can be done better if undertaken co-operatively, and we propose to meet in this room, or elsewhere, as may be decided upon. Each member will feel he has the moral support of all the others, and will be ashamed to slack under such circumstances."

He paused, but as nobody said anything, went on:—

"One of the members has received a rather bad report. In fact, a report which hints that,

unless there is a change for the better during the coming term, he will be requested to try his luck at another school. This member, I may add, has been jawed pretty severely all round. It appears he did badly in certain recent exams, and it was actually proposed that he should be separated from his friends, and fired into a lower class amongst a lot of wretched kids. With a good deal of trouble he has, however, succeeded in being allowed to stick on for the present where he is,—that is to say, in his old classes,—but there is no use in disguising the fact that his position is fairly rocky. On the other hand, the prospect of working like mad in utter loneliness was a bit too thick even for him. Hence the club. Q.E.D.” And the chairman abruptly seized a pen.

“Now for the rules. Anyone can propose any rules he likes, and, if they pass the rest of the committee, they become law. Then we’ll draw up a time-table. . . . You chaps will stay for dinner, of course? . . . I propose Rule I. No talking to be allowed on subjects which do not bear upon the actual work being done.”

He paused, and looked round for approval, pen in hand.

“Rule II,” began Palmer.

“Wait. I have to write the rules down as we go along. Shove over the green ink, Evan. We must do things properly.”

“We’ll never get to the end if you’re going to mess about with different coloured inks,” Palmer grumbled.

"I won't take a jiff; you'll see. . . . There you are. . . . You can fire ahead now with Rule II."

"Rule II. A fine of sixpence to be imposed on any member who leaves his work unfinished, or who in the opinion of any other member shows a tendency not to do his fair share."

The chairman considered Rule II., but did not write it down. "In the opinion of *all* the other members, it must be," he said.

"No it mustn't. Young Hayes would back you up. Unless I approve of the rules I won't join the beastly thing."

The chairman dipped his pen. "What about grub?" he asked meekly.

Palmer glanced round the room. "Well, what about it? I don't see any."

"I mean, should we have any rules about it?"

"No. We'll leave that to your discretion:—I suppose the meetings will take place here. Personally, I find a certain amount of grub rather a help."

"Does that include things like stone-ginger, or sweets, or——"

"They all help," said Palmer, simply. "Rule III. Members to be fined sixpence for each non-attendance, unless they've got a jolly good excuse."

Beach wrote down Rule III.

"And cribs?" he suggested diffidently. "I sometimes——"

"We'll do the construes together."

A new idea seemed all at once to dawn upon

Beach, and he turned to his companions. "Of course, you fellows mayn't want to join the club," he began. "After all, the only one who will gain anything by it will be me. . . ."

"I don't know whether I'll be allowed to join," said Evan. "I've only spoken to my mother about it."

"And you, Palmer?"

"What about me?"

"Do you think——"

Palmer was looking out of the window. "There's Janet Oulton with your mother. Oh, I'll join of course."

"Another thing," Beach pursued. "You've just put it into my head. Perhaps we ought to ask Miles Oulton." He glanced at Evan, who made no reply.

"I won't ask him, of course, unless you both want me to."

"You'd better ask him," said Palmer. "He won't come, but still——"

"Why won't he come?"

Palmer shrugged his shoulders.

"He looks rather down on his luck," Beach went on. "I was watching him in class to-day."

"Ask him if you like; but even if he wanted to come I don't believe the old boy would let him."

"You mean after the row?"

"I mean exactly what I say," said Palmer, fixing his eyes upon Evan, who had looked up curiously.

"Well, I'll ask him," Beach declared. He

regarded Palmer for a moment or two in silence. "Why didn't you write during the holidays? You got both my letters, I suppose?"

"Yes—such as they were. . . . As a matter of fact, I intended to write, but a lot of things happened and I forgot all about it. I was rather busy."

"Weren't you with the Westons all the time?"

"I was."

"It was a pity about Weston's young brother."

"Yes."

Palmer seemed disinclined to pursue the subject, but Evan took it up. "It's well it didn't happen till the end of the holidays."

Palmer looked at him. "That's a lovely thing to say!"

"I didn't mean anything except——"

"I'll tell you all about it some other time," Palmer interrupted, speaking to Beach. "I had one or two rather queer adventures. Young Weston—Grif—was an awfully nice kid:—about the nicest I've ever struck."

He stared out of the window for a minute or two in silence; then suddenly putting his hand in his jacket pocket, he drew out a revolver.

"Where did you get that from?" asked Beach, in astonishment.

Palmer toyed with the weapon, but did not seem to observe Beach's outstretched hand. "I got it from a chap called O'Neill. He's a doctor, and lives near the Westons' grandfather. I'm going to stay with him at Christmas perhaps."

"But what do you carry it about for?"

"I don't. I only brought it round here to show you."

"Why did he give it to you?"

"That's part of the adventure. It was, all mighty queer."

"It was jolly queer his giving it to you, anyway."

"No it wasn't. He thinks a lot of me: he wrote to my father about me. He made me promise to tell my father about the revolver, too, but I haven't had time yet."

"Aren't you going to tell him?" asked Evan.

"I think I mentioned that I had promised," replied Palmer, loftily. But he unbent a little immediately afterwards. "Of course I'll tell him some time; but he's the sort of old chap who would be scared out of his life at the sight of a revolver, and I don't want to scare him—naturally. You see, he's a rather peculiar old boy. He'll start thinking about time and space and try to get into the house next door with a latchkey that doesn't fit. Do you know what he actually got me the other day for a present? You'd never guess. A box of soldiers! He saw them in some shop he had got into by mistake, and brought them home with him. I very nearly asked him to change them for a rattle."

"People always give you things you don't want," said Beach, with a glance at his bookshelf.

"Oh, I daresay; but a box of soldiers is about the limit. I'll swear he doesn't know what age

I am. He thinks I'm six. I tried to make him realise things a little by asking him to buy me a safety razor, but the shock only lasted for a few minutes. . . . However, we'd better get on with the business of the club. What about this time-table you mentioned?"

"Just a sort of thing to hang up, you know," Beach explained apologetically. "A kind of chart, so that we'll be able to see at once if we're spending too much time on any particular subject."

"In that case it's unnecessary:—at least so far as you're concerned."

"He wants to make it," said Evan, rather patronisingly, "and it won't do much harm. He's got red ink for the time-table."

"I've got green and red and black and purple," said Beach.

Palmer looked at the row of bottles. "I think, after all, I'd better bring you my box of soldiers."

"There won't be much work done by anybody if you do," replied Beach, simply. "In spite of the fact that you've become such a very big man during the last two months."

"He's getting a moustache," said Evan, who for some moments had been gazing steadfastly at Palmer. "You can't see it from the front, but if he stands sideways in a good light——"

"It's because of the colour you can't see it," Palmer interrupted. "If my hair was dark it would show like anything."

"Well, I'm six weeks older than you," said Beach.

"That's nothing. You're still a child who dirties its fingers with coloured inks, and I'm a man. If I belonged to the working class, I'd probably be thinking of marrying and getting a family."

"Lord help the family."

"The family would be a jolly sight better off than most families are, with me to look after them. The question of the moment, however, is whether we're going to begin the great co-operative scheme this evening?"

"We ought to, I suppose," said Beach, with a faint sigh.

"Well, we won't if you start fooling about drawing up time-tables. We'll put on young Hayes for the Latin prose, and I'll look after the maths."

## XXXI

DAY after day passed, but still Beach did not broach the subject of the club to Miles. Then one afternoon, in the dressing-room of the gymnasium, he came upon him by accident, alone, and sat down on the bench near him. Miles was wrapping a pair of shoes in paper. He looked up, nodded without smiling, and finished tying his parcel. He was about to go away when Beach spoke.

"I say, I've been wanting to see you. Are you in a hurry?"

"No."

Miles's expression was not conciliatory, but he lingered where he stood, waiting for Beach's next words.

"I was wondering if you'd care to join a sort of club we've got up—for working together. You know the other chaps. Dorset and Hayes."

"What do you want me for?"

"Oh, we thought we'd ask you. We're not going to ask anybody else."

"Thanks; I don't think I'll join."

"Why not? You might as well."

"I don't think I'd care to."

He lowered his eyes and plucked at the string of the parcel he held. It was unfortunate that Beach failed to read into his words anything

but their literal meaning. It was doubly unfortunate that at that precise moment Cantillon's pale face should have smiled in at them from the doorway.

"Hello!" he purred. "I've been looking for you everywhere, Oulton."

Beach stiffened all over, like a dog in the presence of strange cats. "Just as you please," he said coldly to Miles, and, as Cantillon stepped hastily to one side to allow him to pass, he stalked out of the room, his head in the air.

Cantillon, from the door, watched him with a lingering, enigmatic smile. He leaned against the doorpost, one thumb in the armhole of his fancy waistcoat. A ring glittered on his little finger.

There was a reddish spark of light in Miles's dark eyes as they travelled slowly up and down the lanky, unprepossessing figure, from his boots to his forehead, and from his forehead back again to his boots.

"What are you waiting for?" he asked gruffly. "I told you before I wasn't going down town."

Cantillon's smile altered. He looked slightly discomfited. "My dear fellow," he began, "there's no need to get——"

"Oh, go to hell," said Miles, with quiet ferocity.

Cantillon seemed astonished, but he was not of the breed that takes an insult too seriously. His manner promptly became ingratiating.

"You seem to be rather in a wax, old man, but I can quite understand it. Anyone who has been in Traill's company for five minutes

naturally feels a little irritable. Judging by his face, too, you must have been sitting on him pretty badly."

Miles said nothing, but walked out of the dressing-room, passing Cantillon as if he were not there. Half-way across the quadrangle, however, he felt a hand laid on his shoulder. He shook it off.

"Look here, Cantillon," he said, stopping abruptly, "I've given you one or two hints lately, but evidently hints are no use. I'm pretty well fed up with you. Is that plain enough? I've stood you about as long as I can. There's something about you that makes me sick. You're all wrong. It's not your appearance, though you look more like a hairdresser's assistant than anything else: it's you yourself. I never liked you at any time, but that letter you wrote to me in the holidays was the finishing touch. Now I've told you, so I hope you'll understand in the future, and act accordingly."

Cantillon laughed—not at all a pleasant laugh—and his eyes gleamed. "I may act more 'accordingly' than you imagine," he softly said. "You're a bit late in getting to know your own mind. You were glad enough to be friends with me last term."

"I wasn't," answered Miles. "I always detested you. Sometimes I could hardly keep from smacking your ugly face. If it wasn't that you look like a sick white rat or something, I'd smack it now."

"I thought I was like a hairdresser's assistant,"

Cantillon sneered. "However, you'll maybe look as sick as I do before all's finished. If I went to Limpet and told him certain little things about you, you wouldn't remain at this school very long."

"All right. Go to him now and I'll come with you, and we'll see who'll get sacked first."

Cantillon merely smiled, and Miles turned on his heel and left him. He heard Cantillon following just behind, whistling softly a music-hall tune, but he took no notice. Yet, as he walked home, his anger gave way to a feeling of depression. He knew that Cantillon's threats were seldom idle, and that he would make trouble if he possibly could. With his whole soul he loathed him now, and all his works, but, as Cantillon himself had pointed out, he had been a little slow in making up his mind. And in quarrelling he had done a foolish thing. He should have dropped Cantillon quietly. This had been his intention; it was what he would have done had it not been for Beach. He saw, or thought he saw, that everything would have been well if he had accepted Beach's invitation; and if Cantillon had not happened to come in just at that particular moment, he believed he would have accepted it. It was like his luck. It was the way things always turned out with him. Well, it was done now, and he must bear the consequences.

When he reached home he went straight upstairs to the room he and Tom used as a study. He had two hundred lines to write, and he sat

down at the table and began to work. He had nearly finished when the door opened and his uncle came in.

Miles hastily covered up his papers with the blotting-pad, but one of them fluttered to the floor. Mr Oulton did not even glance at it: "What are you doing?" he asked, in his cool, level voice.

Miles flushed and stammered. His face had a guilty, hang-dog look; in his dark eyes was an expression of mingled sullenness and fear—an expression which Mr Oulton saw very frequently, and which irritated him more than open defiance would have done. It aggravated the dislike he felt for the boy; it had even tempted him before now to do something to justify the feeling with which Miles so obviously regarded him. He took two strides to the table, while Miles shrank from him involuntarily. Mr Oulton's lip curled.

"For heaven's sake don't cringe that way, like a whipped cur." He turned over the blotting-pad. "What were you given these lines for?"

"For not staying in."

"I see. Do you get much of this sort of thing to do?"

"No."

Mr Oulton's voice was cold as the stab of a knife. "Well, it will have to stop. I don't pay for your schooling to have you waste your time over stuff of this kind. If you require punishment it must be done with a cane. I shall write to Dr Melling."

## XXXII

AND at the Workers' Club that evening Beach informed them of his lack of success. The account he gave of his interview was received by the other members in silence. Evan, though he said nothing, was in reality pleased that Oulton was not going to join, but Palmer Dorset seemed merely indifferent. Of the three, Palmer alone was now on speaking terms with Miles, but he never spoke to him of Beach, though on more than one occasion, during the next few days, he had an opportunity to do so.

These opportunities were furnished by Miles's own remarks—remarks the drift of which Palmer apparently failed to comprehend. At any rate, he did not repeat them to Beach, any more than he repeated to Miles what Beach had said about him. One evening, however, when they had finished work, and Evan was gone, he deliberately opened the subject.

"I don't quite understand about that chap Oulton."

Beach was sick of work. These new arrangements tried him very severely. He heaved a sigh of relief as he put the books away before sitting down to listen to Palmer. He lit a cigarette.

"What don't you understand about him?" he asked lazily. "What's he been doing?"

He held out the cigarettes to Dorset, who shook his head.

"You know I never smoke."

"Well, there's no need to swank about it: a cigarette wouldn't do you any harm."

"When you told me he had refused to join the club, I wasn't surprised; it was what I had expected:—but I was surprised afterwards, and I'm surprised now."

"Why? What has happened?"

Palmer, leaning back in his chair, gazed at the ceiling. A slight frown puckered his forehead. "He seems to have dropped Cantillon. . . . They must have had a row. At all events, they aren't on speaking terms now. I think you'd better make a second attempt."

"If you mean a second attempt to get hold of Miles, I'm jolly sure I won't," said Beach, emphatically. "You can blooming well make the next attempt yourself."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I'm not his friend," said Palmer, simply.

Beach seemed unimpressed. "You're as much his friend as I am, or ever was. You're a good deal *more* his friend if it comes to that. It's just that you don't like doing it, and want to stick it on to me."

Palmer shook his head. "That isn't true. It never was true. You mayn't be aware of it, and I'm not defending the taste, but, as a matter of fact, most chaps like you. Oulton does, at all events. He likes you more than he likes anybody else."

"Rot."

"It isn't rot. There's no use being stupid about it."

Beach, however, appeared neither pleased nor convinced by these references to his popularity. "It's all right talking, but I'm not going to ask Oulton again. I've done everything that could be expected. In fact, I've done a jolly lot more, for it wasn't my fault that we ever quarrelled."

Palmer looked at him closely. He seemed on the point of saying something, but refrained.

"I never cared a great deal about him at any time," Beach went on, determined to put an end to the matter once and for all; "and you know that yourself."

Palmer waited a moment. Then he said, "You must remember that he was always a rather solitary kind of chap. He kept very much to himself until he became friends with you."

"And with you too."

"I tell you he never *was* friends with me. He knew me simply because I happened to be here now and again, and at first I wasn't here very often. At any rate, I didn't matter. What annoyed him was your taking up young Hayes."

"Why should that annoy him? It was through him I first got to know Evan."

"Yes, and then you took him up violently. I mean, it was perfectly obvious that he was more your friend than we were."

Beach coloured. "That's absolute bosh," he said.

"It isn't. But I didn't mind. Oulton did:—that's what made the difference. He particularly disliked Hayes."

"But why? Evan had done nothing to him."

"He thought he was sucking up to you; that he was shoving himself quite too much into the picture. You see, you were very pally with Hayes, but we weren't; and Hayes seemed to take it for granted that because he was your pal he must be ours. You may accept what I'm telling you as true, and I'm putting the case very mildly, and much more from an outsider's point of view than from Oulton's."

"Evan never sucked up to me in his life: he always did just the opposite."

"That's not the point. Oulton thought he did."

"Then why on earth, if he couldn't come before, should he suddenly want to come now? I'm not going to drop Evan for Oulton." He frowned, and suddenly burst out angrily, "The whole thing strikes me as utterly rotten."

Palmer shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not defending it: I'm not saying it either is or isn't rotten: I'm merely telling you that that's how things were, and that now he wants to come back."

"Well, I don't believe it," said Beach.

"Why don't you believe it?" asked Palmer, with a patience that was slightly ironical.

"I don't believe he's such a fool. *You* weren't jealous of Evan, were you?"

Palmer wrinkled his forehead. "Jealous! Me! Of young Hayes! Good Lord!"

"Well, you needn't speak in that way. I'm only going on what you've just been telling me yourself."

"What *I've* been telling you! You're going very far off anything *I* ever told you if——"

"Well, it doesn't matter."

"The next thing I have to remark is that I have taken steps for the elimination of Cantillon."

He dropped his bomb-shell and waited for Beach to say something, but Beach said nothing.

"I find he annoys me," Palmer pursued calmly. "He has evidently forgotten all about the lesson we gave him, or else he thinks *we've* forgotten. I discovered yesterday morning that he'd been bullying young Brydon. I came upon the kid myself, at the back of Johnson's, blubbing. He's got glands or something, and Cantillon had been screwing his neck for repeating what he called 'a private conversation.'"

"What sort of conversation?"

Palmer shrugged his shoulders again. "The sort of conversation Cantillon naturally *would* have with kids, I suppose."

"And what did you do?"

"I spoke to Cantillon about it: I even gave him another chance: and then, as he wouldn't take it, I reported him as an undesirable."

Beach looked up quickly. "What do you mean? Who did you report him to?"

"To Limpet—this afternoon."

Beach stared. "You mean——" His stare intensified as the enormity of the thing grew upon him. . . . "You mean you *sneaked*?"

Palmer winced slightly at the word, but he answered coolly enough: "It was the simplest way, after I had decided on the elimination. . . . Though I shouldn't myself call it sneaking."

"But you went to Limpet?"

"Yes."

"What do you call it, then?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter what I call it," said Palmer, impatiently. "That's what I *did* anyway. I went to Limpet and reported Cantillon."

Beach realised that there was no use discussing the matter. He also remembered that it was he who had originally put this elimination idea into Dorset's head. But then——. He now knew he should never himself have carried out that plan. "He will only get a licking," he said, "and you might have given him that yourself."

"I don't think he'll only get a licking."

"What did you tell Limpet?"

Palmer coloured faintly. "I told enough for my purpose: there's no use doing things by halves. I gave Cantillon his chance before I told anything."

"What chance?"

"The chance to write home and get his people to remove him."

"And did you expect him to take it?"

"It would have been better than being expelled."

Beach did not reply. He found it difficult not to express a pretty strong disapproval of the course Palmer had adopted. It was not that he did not think Cantillon should be expelled. He

did. But, after all, sneaking was sneaking, no matter how you looked at it. "If he's sacked, it may all come out," he said at last.

"What may come out?"

"That you snea—told."

"I daresay it will."

"And you know what that will mean."

"I know it will mean very little to me. You don't imagine I'm going to have my actions ruled by the ideas of a lot of kids!"

"You'll have a pretty rotten time of it."

"I don't believe it: but, if I have, I can stick it. You needn't worry about that. I admit there is one drawback to be considered."

"What?"

"As soon as he finds himself in the soup, Cantillon will try to get even with anybody he happens to have a spite against."

"He'll have a considerable spite against you, I should say: and he's always had one against me."

"He can't do anything to us:—that's the advantage of having lived a blameless life. In the eyes of Limpet I am rather more than blameless just now. Limpet displayed an insight into character which really does him great credit. Somehow, one hadn't supposed him capable of such an effort. An insight into my character, I mean:—I can't say he has ever been very bright about Cantillon's. . . . No; the real drawback is not you, nor me, but Oulton."

"Oulton?" Beach repeated. "What has he to do with it?"

"I don't know," said Palmer. "I don't think he has anything to do with what I was talking about. But once he sees it's all U.P., Cantillon will probably spread himself for a general confession, into which he'll drag as many chaps as possible. He's a cunning brute, you know, and he'll lie like evermore. He and Oulton used to knock about a good deal together last term. On at least two occasions when Cantillon got out at night Oulton was with him—met him outside. Grainger told me so, and he knows. . . . But you can think it all over for yourself; I'll have to be trotting on now: it's getting late."

Beach looked at his watch. He felt the whole thing was unsatisfactory. Surely there were other methods! Dorset might have tried them first, or, at least, have consulted *him* first——

"Good-night," said Palmer. "Don't bother coming down. . . . I'm going to take your bicycle lamp: somebody has pinched mine: at any rate, I can't find it."

### XXXIII

BEACH sat on alone, turning it all over in his mind, long after Palmer had left him. Before he went to bed that night he had reached the conclusion that Dorset had acted rightly. He himself could not have given another boy away to Limpet,—not even Cantillon,—but that did not matter. He saw now clearly enough that Palmer had had very little choice. Any other course he might have adopted would almost certainly have met with either partial or total failure. Palmer's methods were no half-methods; they were pitiless and bold as the surgeon's knife; but they were at least thorough.

What, however, puzzled him much more than the ethics of the situation, was the curious attitude Dorset seemed to have taken up, not only in regard to this affair, but in regard to Miles Oulton. Why should he be so interested in Miles, so bent on befriending him? Dorset had never, previously, struck him as being that kind of chap at all. Yet even leaving Miles out of it, it was quite plain that these kids—Burke and Grainger, and now Brydon—had come to look upon him as a sort of natural protector.

He went to school next morning wondering what would happen, yet scarcely expecting anything to happen immediately. The extremely

rapid development of the situation took him by surprise. Cantillon did not put in an appearance at all, and though, at first, only contradictory rumours were afloat, as the morning passed something approximating to the real state of affairs began to leak out. Young Brydon, a little nervous but exceedingly conscious of his own importance, had been enticed into confidences, which, as the day wore on, tended to become more and more detailed and thrilling. Finding himself suddenly an object of interest to boys who had never before shown any sign of being aware even of his existence, he was naturally dazzled by this novel position, and began, in the opinion of his own particular chums, to put on no end of side, and to act the giddy goat generally. Only Beach Traill and Palmer Dorset held aloof from the groups, all agog for information, which surrounded him; and Brydon, anxious to remain as long as possible in the limelight, gave rein, it is to be feared, to a remarkably fertile fancy, in the embroidery of the somewhat meagre facts that were all he had at his disposal.

Palmer's name had not been mentioned: Brydon, probably acting under strict instructions, had by a miracle managed not to bring it in; nevertheless, it was suspected that both Dorset and Beach Traill were more behind the scenes than anybody else. This suspicion became a certainty when, towards the end of the morning, Palmer was called out of class.

It was Dr Melling himself who summoned him,

and a little buzz of excitement, promptly silenced by Mr Ledgerwood, rose among the other boys as he got up to leave the room. When he came back, ten minutes later, all eyes were fixed upon him. Perfectly calmly, as if nothing had happened, he walked to his desk, amid a sudden hush. Even Mr Ledgerwood paused in his lesson to regard him with a surreptitious curiosity. The only person in the room who did *not* look at the red-haired boy was Miles Oulton.

A faint stir, like the sigh of summer wind, announced that the moment of tension was passing. It seemed as if the interrupted lesson was about to be resumed. Edward Weston whispered something to the boy beside him and received a headshake in reply. Miles Oulton, who with a rather white face had sat gazing at his desk, now took courage to look up. He looked rapidly at Palmer and then away again. But temptation was assailing Mr Ledgerwood, and, against his better judgment, he yielded to it.

"You look very content with yourself, Dorset; as if you had just been doing something you particularly enjoyed doing."

The remark was ill-advised and unfair. It was not really like Ledgy, who usually knew—nobody better—exactly where to draw the line. Moreover, it was based entirely on a superficial manner that might only be skin-deep, and it could hardly fail to produce an impression strongly unfavourable to Palmer on the minds of the other boys. Mr Ledgerwood already regretted it. To do him justice, he was not yet

in possession of all the facts of the Cantillon case. He was conscious of a single rapid glance from Palmer's small brown eyes—a glance very bright and hard, and distinctly unpleasant. Then he saw the boy's forehead wrinkling up.

"Yes, sir?" he queried, in tones of mild surprise.

Mr Ledgerwood knew that he must either advance or retreat. It was against his policy to do the latter, so he assumed his most elaborately dispassionate manner. "This indifference to the calamities that overtake your companions seems to point to an unusually callous disposition. You naturally *are* callous, Dorset, aren't you?" His gaze rested on the boy's face with an air as of one undertaking a somewhat distasteful investigation solely in the cause of science.

"Yes, sir."

Mr Ledgerwood dug his hands deeper in the pockets of his jacket. There was in Palmer's voice just that shade of veiled insolence which he himself—possibly because he practised it—was particularly quick to detect. He would have liked to give Dorset a hundred lines, but that was hardly feasible.

"Of course, one does not wish to press the point," he said, "but I confess that I should like to see you show a little more feeling for the misfortunes of others. Instead of being sorry, you seem to be completely indifferent to the fact that one of your schoolfellows has got into trouble."

"I'm not sorry, sir. Would you mind telling me why I should be?"

Mr Ledgerwood apparently did not mind. "If for no other reason, at least for that fellow-feeling which is supposed to make us wondrous kind. You must know, in your heart, that if all the incidents in your own private life were suddenly to appear written up on that blackboard, you would not feel nearly so comfortable as you do at present. I can even imagine that that self-complacency, which you unfortunately suffer from, would entirely disappear."

Palmer, without a word, collected his books, rose from his seat, and walked down the room, followed by the gaze of the whole class.

Mr Ledgerwood, with a face that had suddenly grown very red, called after him hastily: "Where are you going, Dorset? Sit down at once."

But Palmer had already reached the door, which next moment closed behind him.

Mr Ledgerwood resumed the instruction of his pupils with an air of nonchalance that under the circumstances was highly creditable. For he knew he had been scored off badly, and to be scored off touched him in his most tender spot. It meant, among other things, a loss of prestige. He knew that Dorset did not care a straw about what he had said to him: he knew that Dorset knew he would be unable to do anything, and had simply taken advantage of the one false move he had ever made in that amusing game of boy-baiting which did so much to lighten the tedium of his day. An instinct had always kept him in the past from tackling Palmer, save in

the most friendly and pleasant manner. He wished he had remained faithful to this instinct. "He's a deep little devil," he reflected. "Every word I said to him was true, too:—that's the worst of it." He ran a disillusioned eye over the youthful faces turned to him, ready to pounce on the first boy who showed the slightest sign of lapsing from the path of rectitude. But nobody showed any such sign. His pupils were as quiet as mice. Yet the air seemed humming with unspoken words—words that hovered on the tip of every tongue. Over the whole room there hung an atmosphere of restlessness and excitement—a sort of tension, as if everyone present waited only the signal of release to begin talking at top speed.

## XXXIV

THE boys trooped out noisily through the two doors, scattering over the quadrangle and the playing fields; and among the first was Miles Oulton, who hastened on down the drive without waiting for, or speaking to, anyone. He had not gone far when he was hailed by a familiar voice. Without stopping, Miles half turned his head, but Palmer was already keeping step with him.

"Why are you in such a hurry? It's not the last day, you know."

A cab turned in at the gates, and they stepped aside to allow it to pass.

"By Jove! that must be his pater," said Palmer, wheeling round.

Miles had not stopped.

"Don't bother waiting for me," Palmer cried, catching him up again.

Miles gave him a sidelong and rather furtive glance. "Have you anything to say to me, Dorset?" he asked.

Palmer smiled. "No, nothing in particular. Looks a bit like rain."

But his facetiousness drew no answering smile from Miles. "I thought perhaps you might have. You don't as a rule trouble to walk home with me:—at least, you haven't done so lately."

"Is that a hint that I'm not wanted now?"

"No. . . . We used to be good enough friends. I thought perhaps you might have heard something."

"What about? Is there anything in particular you want to find out?"

"I was a fool ever to have had anything to do with him," said Miles, half to himself.

Palmer nodded, not unkindly. "You were. You ought to have known. I suppose, for that matter, you did know."

Miles made no response.

"Do you think he's been spinning yarns about you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well, perhaps he hasn't, then," said Palmer, cheerfully.

"He hates me like poison. . . . It's this beastly uncertainty that's so rotten."

"Is there anything for him to tell?"

"Nothing much, except that I was out with him once or twice at night."

"Is that all?"

"And we backed horses once or twice, and played billiards in pubs. But I never took a drink; I never wanted to; I knew it was too risky."

"Blest if I thought chaps ever played the fool like that except in school stories!" Palmer exclaimed. "It doesn't seem very serious, even if he does blab about it."

"He may tell a lot of lies."

"Why don't you go to Limpet yourself, then, and have done with it? That's what *I* would do under the circumstances."

"But I'm not sure that Cantillon *has* said anything. I don't want to give myself away for nothing. . . . If I could only keep them from getting to know at home, I wouldn't mind whatever else happened."

"Well, Limpet didn't haul you up to-day, so I daresay you'll be all right. You've got to remember that he has some idea now what Cantillon's like. He's not going to swallow everything *he* may tell him. Besides, so far as I can see, all that you did was done out of school, and you're a day-boy, not a boarder. That makes a difference."

Miles wondered sadly if it did. It certainly would not make any difference to his uncle, and it was of him he was afraid, not of Dr. Melling.

"But Cantillon must have told him," he repeated uncertainly, as if hoping that Palmer might contradict him. "It isn't in his nature not to."

"I know that. I don't myself quite understand what has happened."

"What did Limpet have you up for?"

"He was asking me about Cantillon."

"But what had you to do with it?"

"He knew I'd caught him bullying two or three kids."

"I wasn't in that, anyway," said Miles. "You knew I wasn't?"

"Yes, I knew."

"But he'll say I was, I suppose. If Limpet didn't haul me up to-day, it may only be because he wanted to write first and tell my uncle. Do you think it could be that?"

"Well, of course it might be," Palmer admitted. Then he slapped Miles consolingly on the shoulder. "I say, you know, these things don't last for ever. Even if there *is* a row it will soon blow over."

"It's not that. You don't understand."

Palmer had been watching his face, and he understood a good deal more than Miles was aware of. "Well, my advice is to get in with your own yarn first. That always counts. And remember that you'll have to stick to whatever you say, so don't deny anything that can be proved. Don't say, for instance, that you haven't been to places, if there are people in them who would be able to spot you."

"No."

Miles seemed extraordinarily dejected. He was loth to leave Palmer now, but they had reached the parting of their ways, and he had to go on alone.

When he entered the house he saw nobody. It was his mother's At Home day, but, in any case, he would not have gone to her, for he was the kind of boy who broods over his difficulties and troubles in secret. He sat down in the dining-room, staring out into the garden, with dark, anxious eyes.

The deep red dahlias hung their heavy heads, and the leaves were beginning to fall. The peculiar beauty of autumn seemed to sigh around the house—that beauty which is like the touch of some loved ghost:—which is like a caress upon the eyelids, on the brain, and on the spirit;

composing all to stillness. Presently he heard footsteps on the stairs. Some of his mother's visitors must be going away. He heard the hall door open and shut, and saw two ladies walking down the garden path.

Directly afterwards he perceived a figure in uniform coming in at the gate. It was the postman, and Miles's fears, which had drowsed into a kind of lethargy, sprang once more into activity. He went to the window, and, pushing it up from the bottom, received the letter:—there was only one.

He stared at the superscription—to Henry Oulton, Esquire—written in Dr Melling's hand, and then put the letter down on the table. But it fascinated him. He saw it while he looked out into the autumn garden—a little white square on the dark crimson cloth. Presently he lifted it and turned it over. It was not sealed, but the gum held it securely. He slipped it into his pocket.

He went to the kitchen. A pleasant-looking girl was ironing some aprons at the table, and humming as she worked.

"Can I have the kettle for a few minutes?" he asked as indifferently as he could. "I want some hot water."

"I'll give you some in a jug, Master Miles."

"I'd rather take the kettle, if you don't mind. The water will keep hotter in it, and I want to steam some stamps."

Back in the dining-room, he put the kettle on the fire, and, kneeling down, held the letter in

the steam that puffed from the spout. Very soon the flap of the envelope loosened at one side, and in another minute he was able to raise it. He drew out the single sheet of paper that was inside, and, putting the envelope in one pocket, and the letter in another, ran back with the kettle to the kitchen.

He would go up to his own room to make sure of being alone. Just as he put his foot on the stairs, he heard the click of a latch-key, and the sound of the hall-door opening behind him. All might still have been well had he kept his nerve, but, knowing that it was his uncle who had come in, he dashed upstairs and slammed his bedroom door.

Hastily he drew out the letter. After all, it was nothing—merely a note to make an appointment. He took out the envelope, but the flap had got stuck down again, and, as with hurried trembling fingers he tried to lift it, it tore. He got the envelope open at last and put the letter inside. Then he remembered he had no gum.

He pressed the flap down, but it stuck only partially, and the paper was blistered—anyone could see that the thing had been tampered with. A wild thought of forging a new envelope occurred to him, but nearly at once he abandoned it as hopeless. There was nothing for it now but to destroy the letter altogether. No one else knew of its existence. The postman had not knocked, and probably nobody had seen him. Even if they had, they would think he had only

brought an advertisement, or a letter for one of the servants.

At this point he heard the sound of footsteps coming upstairs, and there followed a knock at his door.

"Yes," he answered nervously.

"The master wants you, Master Miles. He's in the drawing-room."

He stuffed the letter in his inside jacket pocket and ran downstairs.

His uncle was there, with his mother and Janet. A servant was clearing away the tea-things. Nobody spoke till the servant had gone. Then his uncle turned to him.

"I had a telephone message from Dr. Melling to say he was coming to see me this evening. What is he coming about?"

Miles's face went very white. He could see nothing in the whole room but his uncle's eyes fixed searchingly upon him: he was half unconscious that the others were there. "I don't know," he answered.

"He said he had written and posted a letter before it occurred to him that it might not reach me in time."

"The postman *was* here," broke in Mrs Oulton. Her dark, short-sighted eyes turned from her son to her brother-in-law, and then to her niece. "Didn't you say you saw him, Janet? You'd better ring and ask if there are any letters."

Janet stretched out her hand to ring, but Mr Oulton waved her back. His keen cold gaze had

been fixed all the time upon Miles. "Did you get the letter?" he asked.

A faint denial came from the boy's dry lips.

"Have you got it there?" asked Mr Oulton, quietly.

Miles fumbled in his pocket and drew it out.

Mr Oulton took it from him. He turned it over disgustedly. "You have read this, I suppose?"

Miles did not answer.

But Mrs Oulton half rose from her chair. "What nonsense, Henry! As if he would do such a thing!"

"My dear Elinor, this is a matter between Miles and me; it is not one in which I can allow any interference. . . . Did you open this letter, Miles?"

"Yes, uncle."

He did not look at his mother or at Janet; he did not look at anyone; but, now that it was all out, he felt a sort of relief. For a moment everything grew far away and misty and unreal; and it was out of this mist that the sound of his mother's voice came to him—distant and faint—like a voice remembered.

But she was speaking to his uncle: he heard her words. "Perhaps he thought it was for him: it is so easy to make a mistake of that kind. Did you think so, Miles?"

"No, mother."

There was a silence. Then Mr Oulton said, with an ominous quietness: "Go to your room: I will come and talk to you there."

Miles turned and went out.

## XXXV

"WHAT are you going to do, Henry?" Mrs Oulton asked, breaking the pause that had followed on the boy's exit.

Janet took the opportunity to slip from the room, and they were left alone together.

"You must leave that to me," answered Mr Oulton, dryly. "This particular kind of offence is not one which can be passed over."

Mrs Oulton bit her lip. She hated her brother-in-law at that moment with an intensity which would have astonished him. By nature timid, weak-willed, and rather weak-minded, an unsuspected energy seemed now suddenly to have sprung up within her. Quite unscrupulous where the interests of her children were concerned, her moral sense had really been undermined by the fact that she and her two boys were dependent for everything upon a man whom she disliked. It was this, and possibly ill-health, which had turned her natural gentleness to peevishness, and her timidity to a rather distressing habit of fibbing. Under different circumstances she might have been lovable and pleasant, she might have been as Miles dimly remembered her to have been when his father was still alive.

They remained in silence,—Oulton with his eyes

on the hearthrug; the small, sallow, faded woman watching him.

"This other affair, this matter Dr Melling is coming to see me about, must be serious too," Mr Oulton said at last. "Otherwise he wouldn't have tried to intercept the letter."

"It mayn't be his fault: he may only have been led into it:—whatever it is."

"That is quite possible. I don't for a moment suggest that he is the only person concerned. On the contrary, from what I gathered, there appears to have been a kind of general row. Such things seem to happen periodically in most schools. . . . Do you know who the burglars were who broke into this house? I didn't intend to tell you, but I suppose now I may as well. They were young Traill and young Dorset. What do you make of that? And then comes this—this tampering with a private letter:—the very meanest sort of act one could imagine, but quite in key with all the rest. This is not ordinary mischief such as any healthy boy gets into. It is essentially dishonest—on the same level as stealing, or even lower. To break into a house at least requires a certain amount of pluck."

The mother's hands were gripped tightly on the arms of her chair.

"He would not have done it if you had treated him differently."

Mr Oulton started. He looked down at his sister-in-law, and was astonished at the almost vindictive expression in her eyes. It was as if a sheep had suddenly turned and threatened to

bite him. "In what way treated him differently?" he asked. "Are you suggesting that it is I who am to blame?"

"You've always been harsh to him—cold and cruel. You've tried to make him afraid of you, and what he has done now only shows that you've succeeded."

Mr Oulton cleared his throat. "Really, Elinor!" he said at last, speaking with a good deal of self-command, "I don't think I understand you. You have lost control of yourself. I have done everything I could for the boy. You don't want him to turn out badly, do you?"

But Mrs Oulton was not to be silenced. "Oh, I know you've bought him his clothes, and paid for his food and his schooling:—but there are other things."

"I see."

"You don't see: you never have seen." Her eyes burned as they rested on that stiff, dignified, carefully correct figure, which seemed to stand on a kind of pedestal of moral superiority that she longed to smash into a thousand pieces.

"I have treated him exactly as I would have treated a son of my own. I am hardly to be blamed if he has—an unfortunate temperament."

"It was you who made it unfortunate. If you had behaved differently—if you had tried to understand him, to sympathise with him—he would never have done anything wrong."

Mr Oulton smiled acidly. "It is rather difficult to understand anyone who consistently avoids you," he said, a little bitterly. "From the

beginning Miles has never hesitated to show me that my society is distasteful to him. That, no doubt, is my fault also."

"It is. He would have liked you if you had let him like you; if you had shown him the least sign of affection:—but you never did."

"At any rate, perhaps you will tell me now what it is you wish me to do?"

"Let me go to him."

"You think it better that he should not be punished? You want him to keep on doing this kind of thing?"

"He will be punished: I will punish him myself."

She got up and crossed the room. Mr Oulton shrugged his shoulders as he took the evening paper from his pocket, and sat down with his back to the light.

## XXXVI

THE telephone message from the school had arrived when Mr Oulton was out. On his return to the office he had immediately rung up Dr Melling, but the doctor was not there, would not be back before six; and such information as he was able to glean was very indefinite. There had been a row, and his nephew was to some extent mixed up in it, though just to what extent he was unable to gather. He was even in the dark as to what exactly had taken place, but he remembered the escapade of Beach and Palmer Dorset, and half decided to take both Tom and Miles from the school.

It chanced that Mr Hayes entered the office while he was still in this mood; otherwise it is hardly likely that the words of warning he dropped to his chief clerk would ever have been spoken. Even so, they were extremely vague and non-committal, prompted, on the whole, by a feeling of friendliness, for, though Mr Oulton disliked Beach, he was not the kind of man to indulge in petty spitefulnesses, and he had a great regard for Beach's mother. But he knew the pride and hope with which Evan was regarded by his father; he had listened to parental outpourings concerning the boy's scholastic successes, and had taken an interest—

somewhat condescending, no doubt, but perfectly genuine—in Evan's future. The matter therefore would probably have begun and ended with those few words of caution, had they not happened to fit in almost miraculously with what Mr Hayes himself had been feeling of late.

For Mr Hayes, during the past few weeks, had become conscious of something amiss. There was the instance of Mr Torrens' Sunday morning class:—Evan was always trying to trump up an excuse now for not attending it. A still greater difficulty was experienced in getting him out to the Band of Hope meetings. He spoke slightly of the people he met there: criticised their appearance, their way of speaking, and what they said. There was no doubt he was becoming increasingly dissatisfied and unsettled. Of course it was flattering to see him a welcome guest at Bredagh Park, but, at the same time, Mr Hayes disapproved of his going there too often, and particularly of this new plan of the Worker's Club. It was, moreover, a little disquieting to think of him as perhaps subject to the subtle beguilements of a Jesuit priest. Who could tell what effects such an influence might have upon him? It was common knowledge that a Jesuit would go to almost any lengths to secure a convert. There was also the Dorset boy, whom Mr Oulton seemed to consider an undesirable companion. But perhaps even more than anything else, there was the fact that, on going into his son's bedroom on the previous night, he had discovered him reading a novel

called "Joseph Andrews,"—a novel with the Traill book-plate in it. Now a very brief inspection had revealed to Mr Hayes the class of literature to which "Joseph Andrews" belonged. He pictured Evan surrounded by a library of similar works, and the picture disturbed his peace of mind. Thus it was that when he reached home, and met the boy in the hall, on the point of going out, he stopped him.

"Where are you going?"

Evan was surprised, not so much at the question as at his father's manner, which was distinctly cantankerous.

"I'm going up to Bredagh Park," he said.

"Have you done your lessons?"

Evan stared. "You know I do my lessons there."

"I didn't know you *always* did them there. I don't see why you should have other boys picking your brains."

Evan was confused and unhappy. The sudden attack took him completely by surprise, and he could not imagine what had happened. At the beginning he had been doubtful whether he would be allowed to join Beach's club, but when no objection had been made he had taken it for granted that none ever would be. Mr Hayes, conscious that his behaviour was a little inconsistent, adopted an aggrieved tone of voice. "What is this I hear about some trouble at school?"

"What trouble? It has nothing to do with Beach."

"At any rate, you'd be much better spending your evenings in your own house now the winter's coming on."

"Why? You never objected before to my going out. The only person who has got into a row is a boy called Cantillon:—I hardly know him."

"He isn't the only one. There are others mixed up in it. There's this red-haired boy that you're always hob-nobbing with."

"I don't hob-nob with him. I never see him except when he's with Beach."

"That's just what I say. They all seem to congregate there. I suppose Cantillon goes there too."

"He doesn't. He and Beach aren't even on speaking terms."

"Well, I don't mind your seeing Beach now and then, but I won't have this running out every evening of the week as a sort of matter of course."

Evan flushed. "But you never said anything against it before," he muttered. "You seemed quite glad when I was asked to stay with the Traills in the summer. How was I to know you didn't want me to go?"

"You might have known it, if it had ever pleased you to. Why should you spend all your time with strangers when you've a comfortable home of your own?"

"Do you mean I'm to stay in this evening?"

"Yes I do; and you can explain to-morrow morning to Beach Traill that you're going to do your work at home in future."

Evan went back into the parlour, followed by Mr Hayes. Here Mrs Hayes discovered them, the boy staring moodily at nothing, his father straddling on the hearthrug. She took in the situation at a glance as she put the tea-tray down on the table.

"I thought you were going out, Evan?"

"I'm not allowed to," he answered sullenly.

"He goes out far too often," Mr Hayes interjected. "It seems to me he's never in the house. It's perfectly ridiculous."

But he looked almost as unhappy as his son, and his wife, knowing his humour, forebore to argue the point. A sense of dignity would prevent his yielding for at any rate another twenty-four hours, and in the meantime she could find out what all the fuss was about.

"Well, you'd better have your tea," she remarked cheerfully. "Winnie won't be in. Papa, you're to take the chair at the meeting to-night. Mr Torrens was here and told me to tell you."

"I can't take the chair," said Mr Hayes, fussily. "How can I prepare a speech at a moment's notice, like that! Mr Torrens is most inconsiderate."

"The speech you always make will do, won't it?" Mrs Hayes answered in surprise.

Mr Hayes grew red and his eyes bulged with a sense of injury. "What speech do you mean? Why do you say I always make the same speech? I never do. I don't see how you can say such a thing! I'm most careful not to repeat myself."

"Well, sit down and have your tea, anyway."

There's plenty of time between this and eight o'clock to prepare half a dozen speeches."

"There isn't plenty of time," Mr Hayes grumbled, sitting down. "You seem to think anything will do; that it's a matter of no importance. I suppose you think temperance itself is of no importance. Perhaps, if you had seen as many ruined homes as I have, it would alter your opinion."

Mrs Hayes laughed. "What ruined homes have you been looking at, papa?"

Mr Hayes grew redder still. "How can you laugh? I'm surprised at you! I've heard of several cases lately—very bad cases. That's always the way with women. Unless a thing happens to affect them personally, they won't take it seriously."

"Well, we can't help being as we are, can we?" Mrs Hayes replied good-temperedly.

"How would you like me to introduce wine and spirits into this house?"

"You had a glass of punch the other night for your supper," said Evan.

His father looked at him, and then at Mrs Hayes, while a deeply-wounded expression overspread his face. "You know I only took it because I fancied I might have caught a chill, and because there is so much influenza going about. I didn't expect my own family to reproach me with it afterwards:—especially as it was against my wish that I took it at all. I'll certainly never do so again, no matter how I may be suffering, or what the doctors say."

At this Mrs Hayes laughed outright. "Papa, you haven't any more sense than a little boy, and Evan has less. I don't know how I put up with you both."

Mr Hayes made no reply, but stirred his tea, and ignored the plate of buttered toast which Evan handed to him. He was profoundly hurt; a man misunderstood; who made every sacrifice for his family and received nothing but ingratitude in return.

## XXXVII

EVAN, standing waiting at the parlour window, saw Beach come whistling down the street, and went out to meet him. There was a sharp nip in the autumnal air, and the wind, rising in gusts, sent the dry brown leaves whirling along the footpath. Evan buttoned his jacket and pulled his cap well down. Neither of the boys wore an overcoat, but they kept their hands in their trouser pockets, and, with their books stuffed into other pockets, walked quickly, the cold wind bringing a glow into their cheeks, and ruffling Evan's hair.

"Why didn't you turn up last night? Dorset and I waited for you for hours, and consequently got precious little work done."

Evan coloured. He had known, however, that the question would come first thing, and his answer was all ready. "I think I'll have to drop the club—for the present."

Beach was considerably taken aback. He hardly knew what to say. "You'll have to drop it?" he repeated uneasily. "Why will you have to drop it?"

"I was told last night that I was to do my work at home."

Beach looked at him quickly, but he said nothing.

"It's not my fault," Evan went on. "I can't help it."

"Well, are you coming up this afternoon?"

Evan hesitated. "I don't think I can," he said at last.

"That's a nuisance. You'll come to-morrow, I suppose?"

"I won't be able to come to-morrow either."

"Do you mean you aren't coming any more?" Beach asked bluntly.

Evan kept his eyes averted: he felt extremely uncomfortable. "Of course not," he said. "It's only—I don't know what's up exactly. My father came in yesterday evening just as I was going out, and began to jaw about my never being at home. He says I'm always at your place, and that I'm to slack off for a bit."

Beach felt relieved. It was probably merely a matter of convention on Mr Hayes's part, and he thought he saw an easy way out of the difficulty. He would get his mother to write and say she wanted Evan to come. He mentioned at once this happy solution of the question.

But with equal promptitude Evan rejected it. "It wouldn't be any good. It's not that he's thinking of."

Beach's uneasiness returned.

"What is it, then?"

"I don't know. He's got some notion into his head. It's partly that book I got from you—'Joseph Andrews.' He kicked up no end of a dust about it."

"Why, what's the matter with it?"

"He didn't approve of it."

"But, dash it all, I didn't give it to you. You picked it out for yourself. I never read a line of the beastly thing. I never even knew there *was* such a book."

"I know. Of course it's all rot, but there's no use telling him that: it only makes him get his rag out. . . . Then, there's Father O'Brien."

"Father O'Brien! What's he got to do with it?"

"It's his being a priest and a Jesuit and all that."

"What the nation—— Hang it, we can't choose our friends just to please your father."

"I know."

Beach was offended. The idea of Mr Hayes objecting to Father O'Brien struck him as beyond a joke. It was infernal cheek. It was even more than that: it was 'beastly insulting—not only to himself but to his mother. He felt angry with Evan too, for he could not help attributing part of the blame to him. He seemed to submit so easily, to care so little. He stiffened all over, and walked on without uttering another word, his eyes very bright, a vivid spot of colour burning in each of his cheeks.

Just as they were entering the school gates, Palmer Dorset came up, fixing a somewhat grim eye upon Evan. "You owe the club sixpence, young Hayes."

"It's all right: he's not coming any more," Beach said shortly.

He turned his back upon both Evan and Palmer, and stalked into school. He was un-

happy and indignant. The boy sitting next him in class informed him that he had got out of the wrong side of his bed; and when Grayson, the football captain, came to him at the end of first period to ask him to play in a practice that afternoon, he refused without giving any excuse. In the middle of second period he was sent for by Dr Melling.

At any other time such a summons would have made him a little nervous, but now his thoughts were so engrossed by this affair of Evan that he tapped at the study door with a feeling of perfect indifference.

Dr Melling was seated before a writing-table. He looked up when Beach entered, and nodded. "Sit down, Traill. There is something I want to speak to you about."

The Doctor went on fumbling among his papers, while Beach took the chair he had pointed to, and waited.

"I scarcely know how to put what I have to say to you," the Doctor began, still with his head bent over the bundle of letters he was sorting. "I think it is best to discuss the matter quite frankly, however."

He looked up. The cold light streaming through the uncurtained window beside him picked out glittering threads in his reddish beard, and revealed every line and hollow in his white, rather worn face. Beach observed that his eyes were a little like Palmer Dorset's,—small, and of a reddish-brown colour. He had never noticed this before.

"You have reached an age, Traill, when I can speak to you as I could not to a younger boy. You are on the threshold of manhood:—many boys no older than you are already out in the world earning their living. I need not refer to this unhappy matter of Cantillon: you know all about it. Cantillon has gone, and I hope he will do better in the new life that lies before him than he did while he was with us. Before he went, however, he told me certain things very strongly to the discredit of another boy. Whether his purpose was malicious, or whether he really desired only to make a full confession, I cannot say. In any case, I was placed in a position that made it impossible for me not to inquire very carefully into what he told me. The result of that inquiry—or rather one of its results—has been to bring two additional names into the matter. One of these names is yours."

Beach looked straight at the Doctor. "Did Cantillon mention me?" he asked.

"No."

The reply was unexpected, and Beach's face expressed his bewilderment. "Who——?" he began, and then stopped.

"I have been told that your influence in the school is a bad one," the Doctor pursued quietly; "that you are more to blame than others whom I may have had to punish. I have thought the matter over carefully, taking into consideration certain remarks made to me by Mr Ledgerwood when I was considering your case some time ago from a scholastic point of view. Scholastically,

Traill, you do not do us much credit, though I am glad to see there has been an improvement in your work this term. But the extremely high opinion Mr Ledgerwood then expressed of your character has induced me to adopt a rather unusual course in dealing with the present situation. I have decided simply to ask you if what I have been told can, in any sense of the word, be taken as true. You are not a child ; you know the difference between right and wrong ; I am placing you on your honour ; and I shall abide by your answer."

"It is not true," said Beach. Then, after a pause, he added, "Thank you, sir."

"Well, that is all, Traill. I believe you ; and I may say that I should have been very much surprised if you had not answered as you did."

Dr Melling smiled as he dismissed him, and Beach went out.

## XXXVIII

HE returned to the class-room with a very bitter feeling against his secret enemy, and a firm resolve to discover his identity. But this was not easy to do. Limpet had distinctly said that it was not Cantillon, and Beach could think of no one else. He looked all round the room. None of the boys there owed him any grudge. Then he noticed the absence of Miles Oulton. Miles was the only boy in the school with whom he was on bad terms: Miles, in spite of all Palmer might say, evidently nursed some imagined injury Beach had done him in his heart:—yet he could hardly believe that even Miles would revenge himself in so miserable a way as this.

He tried to think of someone else, but he could not, and the thought of Miles kept recurring to him at intervals, though he did his best to banish it. Miles had been a pal of Cantillon's—at least everybody said so—and Cantillon probably connected him, Beach Traill, with what Dorset had done. After the scene in the ball-alley, Cantillon would naturally believe that Beach had had a share in this other scene also, which had ended in his expulsion. Miles himself might believe it, and might resent it,—on his own account, if not on Cantillon's,—for Dorset, who

knew everything, seemed to think that Miles too ran a considerable risk. . . . Beach had known him for a good long while, of course, and he had never known him to do anything really rotten. . . . He had known him for a good long while. . . . He had always been a peculiar kind of chap,—very quick to take offence,—a moody, touchy sort of beggar. . . . Cantillon might have got some kind of hold over him—might have threatened him. . . . But Miles would hardly do a thing like this, even if he thought Beach had had a share in the sneaking business—the sneaking to Limpet. He would hardly do it, surely, even to save his own skin? Limpet had said two names were involved. Whose was the second? Dorset's? But Dorset had always been in it. Perhaps Limpet had meant Miles. It was certainly a horrible muddle from beginning to end. . . .

Apart from Palmer Dorset, and Burke and Grainger and Brydon, was there anyone else except Miles and Cantillon who was mixed up with the affair at all? There might be other kids of course, but no kid would begin jawing about "bad influences." That was bound to have come from some older boy. And the little boys would be on his, Beach's, side. . . . He felt inclined to seek the aid of Dorset, but it was impossible to do so in class. Moreover, he did not care much for Dorset's peculiar methods of finding out things. By the end of the period he had determined to keep the matter to himself.

In the playground he detached young Tom Oulton from a group of companions, and began to question him.

"Where is Miles?"

Tom looked at him, he fancied, more than a trifle oddly. Also he glanced carefully around to make sure they were out of earshot before he replied.

"You won't say anything about it, will you? I was told to keep my mouth shut, but Limpet was up at our house last night for more than an hour."

"Has there been a row, then?"

"A row! I should rather say so! Miles was in the study with Limpet and uncle, and I haven't seen him since."

"You must have seen him when you went to bed."

"I didn't. I was put into another room. Even mother hasn't seen him. Uncle won't let her. Nobody's allowed to speak to him. I tried to go to him, but uncle caught me. After that, he locked Miles's door, and took away the key."

"Old beast."

"He's not really. He's all right in his own way."

"Was he waxy when he caught you?"

"You bet! Not with me: he was quite decent with me. But he's waxy with Miles. He's going to let him out himself, he says, after lunch to-day. He told me so."

Beach frowned, and young Tom added, "There must be something pretty serious up. The others

know what it is, but, when I tried to get it out of Janet, she sat on me, and said she'd smack my head."

Beach turned away, and Tom, gazing after him, wondered what there was in it to make *him* look so glum.

Beach, in truth, not only looked, but felt glum. All day, with no small difficulty, he avoided both Palmer and Evan, for he did not want to be questioned about his interview with Limpet. He wanted to be alone. Therefore when, on hurrying out purposely immediately school was over, he found Palmer waiting for him in the porch, he was considerably exasperated, and swore below his breath.

"Going home?" said Palmer, taking his arm, a thing he very rarely did. "Aren't you going to wait for Hayes?"

"I'm in a hurry," Beach answered, not at all genially. "If you see him you might tell him I had to go on."

"I'm afraid I won't see him," Palmer replied cheerfully. "I'm in a hurry too."

"Are you going to take a tram?"

"So that you may do the other thing—eh? I haven't quite made up my mind."

"Look here, Dorset, I'm not going to answer any questions, and I'd rather you didn't ask any. I'll tell you about it some time again, if there happens to be anything to tell."

"Is it so bad as that? What on earth did he say to you?"

Beach stopped short, and freed his arm from

Palmer's grasp. "I hope you won't be offended, but I'm going to catch this tram."

"All right, catch it. I'll wait for the next."

"You might wait for Evan."

Palmer frowned. "Why can't the little brute walk home by himself?" he grumbled. "Am I to come round this evening or not?"

"Of course."

"I don't see that there's any 'of course' about it. You may want to catch another tram, or something."

He shouted the last words after Beach, who had stepped on to the road to meet the approaching car: then he turned back towards the school.

## XXXIX

BEACH's first idea had been to seek an immediate interview with Miles, but when he drew nearer the Oultons' house he abandoned this plan. It was not till he was almost home that it was suddenly revived, and then by the unexpected sight of Miles himself, about a hundred yards ahead, turning the corner of one of the avenues that led down to the river. Beach jumped off the car, and followed him, but without hurrying, for he knew Miles could not escape.

Walking through the yellow autumn afternoon, his smouldering wrath seemed to be fanned by the restraint he put upon it; his natural impulse being to rush after Miles at full speed. He would have done so, only there were houses on either side of him, and it would be better that their interview should take place in the deserted meadows by the river—better that it should be private, for he did not know how it was going to end.

As these fields came into view, he saw that Miles had paused on the edge of them, and was leaning over a railing, gazing down to where the water foamed through a weir. Above his head, the trees spread dark branches, sparsely decorated with brown and yellow leaves. The fallen leaves lay in a damp heavy carpet under

his feet, and the grey sky showed a band of pale gold where the sun was sinking.

In the silence, the low murmur of the weir, coming across the faded, sodden fields, seemed a part of that picture of loneliness and melancholy, which the solitary figure of the boy accentuated; and it was this—a dim sense of it realised only as a weakening of the impulse that had brought him here—which hastened Beach's action. He somehow felt that he must act at once, or he would not act at all. He quickened his pace.

On the coarse matted grass his feet made no sound, but, as he came under the trees, the breaking twigs, and a rustle of withered leaves, caused Miles, who seemed lost in profound meditation, to look round. His face was white; his eyes dark;—that was all Beach seemed to see. No greeting passed between them; possibly because everything in Beach's attitude expressed an open hostility. Miles, drawing himself up, waited for him.

"Have you been saying anything about me?" Beach began aggressively; and somehow the question, taken with everything else that had befallen him of late, turned Miles's dejection to a kind of nervous fury. He felt a sudden rage against Beach:—everything had happened through Beach. He made no answer, but a dark flush mounted to his cheeks, and his eyes shone.

Beach waited for a moment: then, as in Miles's silence, and in his altered colour, he read an admission of the charge, he repeated it. His head was slightly thrown back, and in his blue

eyes, and in the sound of his voice, there was something cold and contemptuous.

"Did you, or did you not, talk about me to Melling?" he asked for the third time:—"tell him a lot of beastly lies about me, in other words?"

Miles looked at him for a moment. "Oh, go to the devil," he muttered, turning his back.

"That means you did?" Beach said quietly, drawing a step closer.

Miles, facing him once more, did not flinch. Understanding the threat which lay behind Beach's words, he felt a kind of perverse pleasure in allowing him to believe anything he cared to believe. If Beach thought him capable of sneaking to Melling, he might continue to think so; he would not undeceive him. Beach struck him with his open hand, and Miles returned the blow.

They fought;—Miles with a sort of recklessness which seemed deliberately to court punishment, and which would not accept defeat. Twice he went down, and each time, as soon as he had got on his feet, he rushed wildly again at Beach, who now tried more to defend himself than to hit his antagonist. He had already hurt him more than he wanted to, but Miles would not give in. Then, as for the third time he struggled to his feet, his hand touched a heavy broken stick and closed upon it. Half blinded by tears, with all his remaining strength he aimed a furious blow at Beach's arm. Beach saw it coming, and tried to jump aside. He might have done so had his foot not slipped on the damp grass. As it was, he stumbled, and the stick,

though it struck his arm first, glanced off it, and thudded heavily against the side of his head. He dropped and lay still.

Miles dropped too, dropped on his knees beside him, and stared down at the trickle of blood that flowed beside Beach's ear in a little thin red streak. In those first seconds he thought he had killed him, and his heart stopped beating. He spoke to him hoarsely. He wiped away the blood with his handkerchief. But Beach moved an arm, and then moved again, and presently sat up.

"I'm sorry—I'm awfully sorry," Miles muttered incoherently. "I didn't mean it—not to hurt you like that."

"It's all right," said Beach. "My skull's fairly thick."

He got on his feet a little shakily. "Here's some one coming."

Where the path curved, at a considerable distance from the spot on which they stood, a figure had come into sight, approaching down the hill. It was the figure of a girl.

"It's Janet," said Beach. "Look here, she mustn't see us like this. I'll go through the hedge and get back home over the wall."

"May I come with you?"

"You'd better not. She's sure to have spotted us. You'd better go down to the river there and bathe your face."

Miles could not insist; he had no right to. He did as Beach told him. Kneeling down on the bank, he soaked his bloody handkerchief in the water, and tried to remove some of the

stains of battle before Janet arrived. It was thus she found him.

"Who was the boy you were fighting with?" she asked, taking the handkerchief from him and dabbing it against his right eyebrow. "You know, this is absolutely silly! You'll just have to keep out of papa's way—go to bed or something:—he'd see at once what you'd been doing."

"I don't care whether he does or not," answered Miles, hopelessly. "What brought you down here? How did you know where I was?"

Janet softly wiped his upper lip, which was cut and swollen. "Aunt Elinor saw you go out, and told me she thought you had gone down to the river, so I came after you. I knew you'd be by yourself. Why couldn't you have put off fighting till later? Coming just on the top of all the rest makes it seem so much worse. . . . But perhaps it's as well to get everything over at once," she added. "Who were you fighting with?"

"Beach Traill."

"I thought so. Now you've got to tell me what it was about."

"He said I sneaked to Melling."

"And wouldn't he believe you?"

"I didn't deny it. If he cares to think I do such things he can."

"What did he say you had sneaked about?" asked Janet, with a sudden suspicion.

"He didn't say what. He just said I had told Melling a lot of lies about him,"

"But——" Janet was silent while she rapidly thought it out. "I wonder if it could have been aunt? She was talking to *me* about Beach."

Miles gazed at her. "What about him?" he asked.

"She seemed to think—I'm sure I don't know why—that he was to blame for all your troubles. And I know she wrote to Dr Melling last night. . . . Papa told her that it was Beach who broke into our house that time:—Beach and the Dorset boy. He says he knew all along about it, but he only mentioned it yesterday, and aunt can talk of nothing else."

"If they did break in, it was Dorset who put Beach up to it. Why did mother write? It had nothing to do with me, their breaking in."

Janet looked at him. His face was cut and bruised and swollen; his right eye was almost closed. "She thinks you are being blamed, while Beach is getting off. I don't know what she thinks. But it's no use trying to argue with her. It was perfectly idiotic of papa telling her—especially after keeping quiet about it for months."

"Beach isn't to blame for anything. There never was a straighter, decenter chap."

"Aunt Elinor thinks he must have a very bad influence—he and Palmer Dorset. She seems to have got that on the brain. She's been talking about nothing else all day. She was furious when I said I thought the housebreaking business rather fun."

Miles stared gloomily at the grey, foam-flecked water running past them.

"Look here," Janet went on, laying a hand on his shoulder, "you'll have to tell Beach you had nothing to do with it. I don't see why you

should be blamed for what papa and Aunt Elinor have managed to do between them."

"I can't tell him. I'll never be able to go near him again."

"Why? Surely you're not going to let this fight come between you?"

"It's not that. You don't know what I did. I hit him with a stick. I only meant to hit him on the arm, but he slipped, and I hit his head. For a minute or two I thought I had killed him."

"You'll have to tell him all the same," said Janet. "In fact, you'll have to tell him all the more. You can write, if you can't do anything else. And you'd better come home with me now. It is to be hoped we won't meet anybody."

"Am—am I very much marked?" Miles faltered.

"A good deal."

"He'll kill me when he sees me. He's furious with me already—and he told me what it would be if there was anything more. He'll keep his word too; he always does."

Janet coloured: she knew to whom and to what he alluded. "Papa won't be home till pretty late, so you needn't see him:—at any rate, not till to-morrow. You can have your dinner early with Tom. . . . I'll speak to him," she added.

"It won't do any good . . . If he hits me I'll leave home. . . . I hate him."

Janet took no notice of his words. She understood; and it was better to say nothing. They walked on together through the noiseless dusk.

## XL

WHEN they reached the house Miles immediately set about making himself as presentable as possible; but, though a bath and a change of clothing made him feel a good deal more comfortable, it did not, as he recognised after a brief glance into the looking-glass, have any other very appreciable effect.

He found his mother alone in the drawing-room, sitting close to the fire, cockling the cover of "The Lady's Home Journal" as she held it between her face and the flames. She looked up when he entered.

He crossed the room and stood directly before her. "I want to ask you something, mother. Did you write or speak to Dr Melling about Beach Traill?"

"Miles, you've been fighting! What will uncle say when he sees you?"

Miles hastily stepped back, so that his face was in shadow. "I don't care what he says," he returned impatiently. "I want you to answer my question."

She laid the magazine down on her lap. "You mustn't speak to me like that. Who were you fighting with? I suppose this is more of that Traill boy's work." Then, as Miles did not reply, but only kept his dark eyes fixed on

her, she added, "Why do you want to know if I wrote to Dr Melling? You may be quite sure that anything I told him was for your good."

"It wasn't for my good to mention Beach. I wish you hadn't done it. . . . If you only knew——"

"Knew! I know quite enough, I think. Besides, I haven't said that I did write."

"No. It doesn't matter." He turned away, recognising the idleness of any further discussion.

"He isn't at all a nice boy, and I don't see why you and others should be made to suffer while he, who is the ringleader, gets off scot-free."

"Ringleader of what?" asked Miles.

"It was he and Palmer Dorset who broke into this house. One can hardly believe it! The influence of such a boy must be very dangerous. Uncle even spoke to Mr Hayes about not allowing *his* son to go with him."

Miles, standing by the chimney-piece, leaned his forehead on his hand. "What you told Dr Melling is all wrong," he said. "Beach is more against everything really low down than any other chap I ever came across."

"Well, I'm sure! A boy who breaks into houses!"

"That was only a joke," said Miles. "You knew, too, that he was my friend."

"I thought you had given up being friends with him. Janet told me you hadn't been to the house for months. I thought your friend was this boy Cantillon, who appears to have got into

trouble also, though I'm sure he seemed to be very nice-mannered and quiet when you had him here."

"He was an absolute outsider. Do you mean to say you couldn't see the difference between him and a fellow like Beach?"

"If he wasn't a nice boy you shouldn't have brought him to the house," answered his mother, very truly.

"I didn't bring him. I never asked him to the house in my life. A blighter like that doesn't wait to be asked."

"Well, I think you're a most ungrateful boy. I do the best I can to help you, and this is all the thanks you give me. . . . And what uncle will say when he sees your face I really don't know!" She was suddenly reminded of her son's latest transgression by an incautious movement which had again brought him into the light. "One would think you had done enough lately, without adding this to all the rest."

"I have done nothing lately," the boy answered wearily. "I never did do very much, and anything there was happened ages ago—before summer." He leaned back in his chair and began to think; but his mother, who was seldom silent, talked on.

## XLI

HE opened the hall door quietly, for he was not allowed to go out, and he was afraid his mother might hear him and call him back. But he had decided that it was better to go to Beach than to write; to write seemed more or less like funking it; and he was going to see this thing through.

As he entered the park and walked beneath the dark silent trees, he thought of those days in the winter and spring and early summer when he had come here pretty frequently. Not a sound was audible. The moonlight washed the lake with silver, and the whole landscape was like something in a dream or in a fairy-tale. At another time it would have pleased him, but just now his mind was too overshadowed by a cloud of troubles for him to take pleasure in anything. He walked beside the moon-silvered lake, but its beauty was like a broken enchantment cast by a wizard who had grown old and feeble, whose spells were impotent.

The lighted windows of the house shone upon his loneliness, seeming to increase it, and for the first time it occurred to him that Beach probably would not be by himself. If Palmer Dorset or Hayes were there, his journey would be wasted, he would have to turn back: but the servant

who let him in told him that Beach was alone, and he went on upstairs, meeting on the first landing Mrs Traill, who was coming down. She stopped and shook hands.

"Why, Miles! it seems a long time since you were here last! I'm glad you've found your way back again. . . . Beach is in his bedroom. He met with an accident this afternoon; he fell against a railing, and hurt his head. I thought at first he might have to get a stitch put in, but the doctor says it is more a bruise than a cut. He just put on a bandage, and told him to keep quiet."

Miles muttered an incomprehensible reply.

"You know your way up," Mrs Traill went on. "I shall telephone to Palmer Dorset not to come, for one visitor is quite enough:—and I don't want you to stay too long."

"It's not—dangerous, is it?" Miles stammered.

Mrs Traill laughed. "Good gracious, child, of course not! Only, he has a bad headache, and I'm sure it would do him good if he could get to sleep."

"Perhaps I'd better——"

"Not at all: he will be delighted to see you. He expects Palmer, but you can tell him he won't be coming—unless he happens to have started already."

Miles ascended the low wide staircase and tapped at Beach's door.

"Come in."

He entered, standing guiltily half way between

the door and the bed. Apparently he found it difficult to say anything.

"Sit down, won't you?" Beach remarked cheerfully.

Miles sat down.

"I say," he began, "I'm frightfully sorry. . . . Are you feeling very bad?"

"No, I'm as right as rain. I've had plenty of worse knocks playing footer. . . . You needn't think there's anything the matter, for there isn't. I've got a bit of a headache, but that's all; and I'm only lying here to please mummy. . . . How are you yourself? I hope mummy didn't spot you; she might suspect something. I hope you kept in the shadow?"

"I didn't. I forgot. But she didn't say anything."

"She wouldn't, of course; but she's pretty cute all the same. However, it can't be helped."

"Why didn't you tell her the truth?"

"Oh, don't be an ass."

"She'll know now."

"She won't know anything. She may guess that we were fighting, but that's all; and she won't ask any questions."

"I want to tell you that I didn't say anything to Limpet."

Beach laughed. "It's a pity you didn't think of doing that a bit sooner. . . . But it's all right."

"I want to tell you, too, that I've found out who it was that spoke to him—or rather wrote to him. It was mother. Mother wrote to him

last night. I don't know what she put in her letter: she wouldn't tell me: but she may have mentioned about you and Dorset getting into our house that time we thought it was burglars."

Beach's interest was suddenly quickened. "By gum! How on earth can she have got on to that, I wonder?"

"Uncle told her."

"Did he? Are you sure?"

"Quite sure."

"We did it, you know, to get a photograph. Mummy gave your uncle a photograph of me, and I wanted it back again. He copped us right enough, all through my stupidity, but he promised to say nothing about it. I didn't ask him to promise; he promised of his own accord."

"I don't think he said anything till yesterday," Miles replied. "Mother says he spoke to Mr Hayes, too:—I don't know whether about this or not, but at any rate about not letting Evan come up here."

Beach's face turned very red. "Dash it all, what business is it of his?" he exclaimed angrily. "He must be even more of a rotter than I thought he was. . . . I'm sorry. I shouldn't say that to you, I know. All the same, it's just a bit too thick."

"I thought I'd better tell you, so that you needn't blame the wrong people."

"Like I did with you. I say, I'm beastly sorry about that. It was a low down thing to suspect you, and I must have been off my rocker. But it'll never happen again."

"Oh, it's all right. It was my fault for not answering you."

"I thought you had your knife in me, somehow:—though of course that's no excuse. You see, you sat on me rather badly when I wanted to make up. . . . However, we'll not talk about it," he added hurriedly. "It's all over and done with. . . . Palmer Dorset will be here soon. In fact, he's late. . . . I say, it was jolly decent of you to come up this evening."

"Oh, rot!" Miles shifted uneasily in his chair.

"It was, though. . . . Did you hear that Ledgy's leaving at Christmas? I think we should get up a presentation to him—something pretty good. . . . I wonder where that canary's egg's got to? He'd know how to work the thing."

"Who do you mean?"

"Dorset."

There was a sound of footsteps running up the stairs. "Here he is," said Beach. "We'll see what he thinks."

Palmer opened the door. "Your mater says she telephoned to me not to come. How are you, Oulton?"

"All right."

Palmer made no inquiry concerning Beach's bandaged head. He cast a single glance at Miles's damaged appearance and held his peace about that also. He sat at the foot of the bed, swinging his legs to and fro.

They talked a little of the presentation to Ledgy, of forming a committee to run the thing, though Palmer was not enthusiastic. Then

Miles said suddenly, "You needn't put my name down."

"Why?" asked Beach.

"I don't think it will do either," said Palmer. "Ledgy's not popular; the chaps won't be a bit keen on subscribing."

"But Miles has nothing against him."

"It isn't that I have anything against him," said Miles. "I don't expect I'll be there: that's all."

"But why won't you be there?"

"Because I'm pretty certain to get sacked. Not publicly: I don't mean that:—though of course it comes to much the same thing."

Beach looked at Palmer, and neither of them spoke.

"It's beastly hard lines," said Beach, at last.

His words seemed to waken Palmer out of a dream. "Of course I knew something was in the air," he remarked, raising his glance as far as the chimney-piece, and letting it finally come to rest upon a photograph of Evan Hayes, which stood there in a frame. "Taken, I should think, at Bangor," he murmured languidly. "I beg your pardon, Oulton, you were going to say?"

"I was going to say that it's rather more than in the air. It's fairly certain."

"You mean, it's not absolutely certain?"

"I don't know yet. I suppose nothing is absolutely certain till it happens. Limpet is to think it over, but I expect I'll hear either to-night or to-morrow."

With this he rose from his chair and made a movement towards the door. "Well, I'll have to be going."

"There's no hurry," said Beach. "Dorset probably wants to do some work, but I don't intend to do any."

"I—— There's a call I have to make; and your mother told me not to stay long." He looked at Beach shyly. "Good-night. . . . Good-night, Dorset."

"Somehow, I rather like him," murmured Palmer, after he had left the room. "It's a pity he's got himself into this hole. I should say he's not the sort of chap who's good at getting out of holes, either. With fellows like that, it's usually a case of in once, in for ever."

"I liked him to-night, too," answered Beach.

## XLII

THE call which Miles had to make was upon Mr Hayes. He had reached that definite conclusion while he sat talking to Beach. He knew the street, but not the number of the house, and, on his way downstairs, went into the library and looked it up in the Directory. Then he let himself out very quietly, so that Mrs Traill should not hear him.

He hurried through the park, and down the road, anxious to lose as little time as possible. Where the road divided, he took the less frequented way, past the back of the convent, for there was always the possibility that he might meet his uncle. His uncle was bound, in any case, to know that he had gone out, but there was time enough to think of this when he had accomplished his task.

A girl, whom he guessed to be Evan's sister, opened the door in answer to his ring. She opened it to the extent of about six inches, and peered out at him through her spectacles. He asked for Mr Hayes.

Mr Hayes was in, and, apparently satisfied by the visitor's appearance, Winnie held the door a little further ajar and invited him to enter. He took off his cap, and followed her into the narrow, dimly-lit hall.

He expected to be shown into an empty room, there to wait for Mr Hayes to come to him, but, as he crossed the parlour threshold, much to his discomfiture, he found himself suddenly in the midst of the entire Hayes family. He halted near the door, in the bright light, while they all rose to receive him—Mrs Hayes, Mr Hayes, and Evan. Evan coloured, and seemed doubtful as to what to do. In the end he solved the difficulty by a feeble “Hello, Oulton!”—but he made no attempt to come forward, made no attempt to introduce Miles either to his mother or his father.

Mrs Hayes took the matter into her own hands. She did not seem in the least surprised to see Miles, and welcomed him at once exactly as if he had been a great friend of her son, who had often been at their house before. She made him sit down in the arm-chair. She said she had known him for years by sight. Her geniality went some way towards relieving the boy of his embarrassment, but the situation, nevertheless, was difficult, particularly as Winnie did not explain that it was her father he had asked for. Miles himself was obliged to mention this, after an uncomfortable five minutes. “I wanted to speak to you,” he blurted out to Mr Hayes, who even then failed to rise to the occasion.

“Yes?” He smiled encouragingly. He was genuinely pleased by this visit from Mr Oulton’s nephew—a school friend of Evan’s—and he was disappointed with the reception Evan himself had accorded Miles—a reception which had begun and ended with that single half-hearted

"Hello." He did his best to make up for his son's unaccountable luke-warmness.

But Mrs Hayes had formed an idea as to how matters really stood. "I think he wants to speak to you by yourself, papa," she explained, giving the uneasy guest a reassuring smile while, with a firm hand, she swept her offspring from the room.

Miles helplessly watched them go. He sat on in silence, hardly looking at the little bald man opposite him, who, having at last grasped the situation, stared now with solemn, inquiring eyes. But he was here for a definite purpose, and he had a strong desire to get his visit over as quickly as possible.

"My uncle, I think, said something to you about Beach Traill," he began nervously: "about him and Hayes—Evan."

"About Beach Traill?"

Miles looked down at the carpet. Mr Hayes's appearance and manner were anything but helpful. He was either, the boy thought, extraordinarily stupid, or else he was pretending to be so. He went on in a low voice, without lifting his eyes. "He said something to you against Beach. My mother told me he did." Then the futility of his errand suddenly struck him, and he was filled with an infinite discouragement. "What my uncle said," he continued abruptly, "was not true. . . . He doesn't care for Beach—I don't know why:—but there's nothing more in it than that."

Mr Hayes shook his head. "I don't think you

should criticise your uncle, Mr Oulton. I'm sorry, but I'm really afraid I can't discuss the matter with you."

"I'm not criticising him," answered Miles. He saw that Mr Hayes was unfavourably impressed, but he was determined to finish what he had begun. "I'm only telling you the truth, and I'm only doing that because I owe it to Traill to do so. My uncle has always been up against him."

Mr Hayes shook his head again. "I hope you'll pardon me if I give you a little bit of friendly advice," he said, with a kind of unctuous solemnity. "I'm sure you are acting from the very best of motives, and nobody likes to see a young man loyal to his chum more than I do: but don't you think it's a mistake to do anything behind your uncle's back? He wouldn't be pleased if he knew. You must remember, too, he's a man of wide experience, while you're only a boy. You didn't look at it in that light—eh?" He suddenly smiled indulgently, rubbing his hands lightly together. "Of course you didn't, or you wouldn't have come. We can't expect to find old heads on young shoulders. . . . And now, I think, we'd better drop the subject, and talk about something else."

Miles got up. He had nothing else to talk about. "You're quite at liberty to tell him all I said," he answered proudly. "I'm sorry for troubling you. Good-night."

His head jerked stiffly in a very formal bow, and he moved towards the door.

Mr Hayes quickly followed him. "Of course

"I'll not tell him anything," he declared effusively. "I shall look upon this conversation as quite confidential and between ourselves."

But Miles was already in the hall.

"I hope you're not offended, Mr Oulton. I wouldn't like to think I had said anything to hurt your feelings. Won't you stay for a while? We'll be having supper soon."

"I'm sorry: I can't possibly stay."

But Mr Hayes still hovered about him as the boy fumbled with the latch of the hall door. He exercised all his propitiatory tact, though Miles gave him very little opportunity to do so, and Mr Hayes soon saw it was quite useless to press him to remain. "Well, you'll come back another night, I hope? We're always glad to welcome any friend of Evan's. In fact, I wish his school fellows would drop in a little oftener. What Evan needs is to be roused up a bit. He's too fond of reading. He's quite content, if he has a book, to sit all evening without saying a word. It's a very good thing, of course, but there's nothing like variety."

"Thank you," said Miles, but he said it from the doorstep and without turning his head. A moment later he was in the street.

## XLIII

So his second task was accomplished, though ill-accomplished, and he might now go home. But he shrank from the inevitable encounter with his uncle. He had been allowed out that afternoon for an hour,—only for an hour,—and in coming out again to-night he had deliberately disobeyed Mr Oulton. Even that was not all. There were the marks upon his face—marks his uncle would be quick to perceive, quick to question him about. Further questions would follow: the whole thing probably would come out—his visit to Mr Hayes—what he had said to Mr Hayes—the object of his visit.

There was trouble in all this; trouble in the threat of expulsion hanging over his head; trouble in his broken friendship with Beach Traill; trouble, too, an unending trouble, in what Miles had never mentioned to a living soul—the constant humiliation of having to eat the bread of a man he hated. For this dependence, taken with the fact that his mother and Tom were provided for by the same benefactor, seemed to make revolt impossible. His mother was forever telling him how much he owed to his uncle, how much they all owed to him. As if he were likely to forget! He hated both the bounty and the manner of its administration.

He hated, above all, the subservient position in which it placed his mother. Tom hardly mattered ; since upon him it produced no effect. Tom got into innumerable scrapes,—far more scrapes than he, Miles, had ever got into,—and yet he was a favourite with his uncle. Tom did not mind asking him for whatever he wanted,—liked the old chap, as he called him ;—chattered to him, sat on the arm of his chair after dinner, went out for walks with him. Miles did not realise that it was just this frankness and lightheartedness which pleased Mr Oulton ; did not realise that Mr Oulton liked to be liked ; did not realise that his own reserve was hidden behind a shrinking and sullen manner, and that the antipathy he so carefully disguised was perfectly obvious. He felt himself to be in a false position, and this made him supersensitive, self-conscious, sullen, and taciturn. He could neither accept freely and graciously the situation in which fortune had placed him, nor summon up sufficient boldness to break away from it. Of a proud and jealous temper, he could not easily take a second place. Loving and hating in extremes, to see that another was preferred before him brought out all that was least attractive in his nature. A sort of perversity then seemed to be awakened within him, and he would go out of his way to be disagreeable, and act as if he were deliberately seeking to turn indifference to dislike.

The boy was unhappy at home. He knew that Uncle Henry, while treating his mother quite

kindly, really had a poor opinion of her. She herself did not seem to see this. He was conscious that it was well she did not: yet her diffidence, her slightly obsequious manner towards his uncle, her tendency to express a somewhat gushing gratitude, filled him with rage and misery. These things were strong enough even to interfere with and spoil his relation to Janet, whom he liked, and who had always shown herself to be his friend.

And he did not make friends easily. It all meant too much to him. He knew he was unpopular, and he was too fearful of receiving a rebuff. The only boy, almost the only person, whom he really cared for, was Beach Traill. Beach's generosity, his bluff honesty and kindness, appealed to him: there had been a time when they had very nearly become chums. That time was the happiest Miles had known since his father's death. Then, with the advent of Evan Hayes, his friendship had seemed to crumble away, leaving behind it a bitter feeling, as of one who has given everything to receive little or nothing in return. . . .

He walked home slowly, and with a visible listlessness in each step he took. He did not want to go home. He thought vaguely of the sea. Boys ran away to sea sometimes, and he wondered how they did it. Down at the docks, he knew only of the cross-channel steamers, and coal-boats and such. But perhaps there were others—ships that went on long voyages—ships bound for distant lands at the world's end. If it

had not been so late and so dark, he could have gone down to the docks now and looked about him. . . . And yet, underneath everything, he somehow knew that he was only playing with a romantic idea—knew that when it came to the point he would never actually cut himself adrift. If it could be done suddenly and irrevocably, on the impulse of a moment, he might do it; but not if he had to wait, if he had time to think or power to turn back. . . .

In the white glare of a passing tram a man met him, glanced at him, walked on a pace or two, and then swung round. Miles started as a hand was laid on his shoulder.

“Where are you going to?”

He lifted his cap hastily. It was Father O'Brien, whom he had not spoken to for a long while, with whom he had never, indeed, exchanged more than a few polite words when, from time to time, he had met him up at Bredagh.

“Nowhere,” he answered vaguely. It was by an effort, a sort of sharp mental tug, that he got back into relation with his immediate surroundings. “I’m going home,” he said.

“That is rather better than nowhere, isn’t it?” smiled the priest. “But I haven’t seen you lately. . . Are you in a hurry, or could you come in for a few minutes? We are quite close to where I live.”

There was something in his present mood which would have led Miles to acquiesce in very nearly any proposal that might have been made

to him. Except in the beginning, when his action had been positive and deliberate, all his intimacy with Cantillon had been based on a similar state of mind. It was as if he were entangled in a net. He simply turned and walked beside Father O'Brien.

The priest opened the door with a latch-key, and five seconds later Miles found himself in a rather bare room, seated in an arm-chair, with Father O'Brien, in another arm-chair, directly facing him. He did not feel very much surprised. The priest, he supposed, wanted somebody to talk to; and, failing a more entertaining guest, had chosen him. It was quite decent of him, of course, and Miles was prepared to do his share, prepared to listen, or to answer questions:—but he felt no more than that.

He gazed round the room, waiting for his companion to speak. The walls were distempered, and the only ornaments were four or five large photographs of pictures. There were not even many books, and the pictures (which were by Mantegna, Cosimo Tura, and Piero dei Franceschi) struck Miles as rather grim, if not positively ugly. A bright fire burned in the grate.

## XLIV

THEY sat in silence. Father O'Brien seemed lost in thought, and Miles from time to time glanced at him uncertainly, and then back again at the pictures. He waited for the priest to speak, but after a little he waited without any sense of uneasiness or timidity. There was something in the atmosphere of the room, something in the attitude of the figure seated opposite to him, seated in a stillness that seemed to take no account of Miles's presence there, which set his mind at rest, and gave him a feeling of security. And gradually it dawned upon him, gradually he felt, that he had not been brought into this room to satisfy a whim; that he had not been brought here, as he had at first taken for granted, simply because Father O'Brien happened to have met him in an idle hour. He had been brought here, he now felt sure, for a definite reason, a reason which presently would be revealed. The priest, he remembered, was a busy man, yet he sat now as if time were of no value to him. The boy realised that he might either talk or be silent, that he would not be pressed to do the one thing or the other:—it was only that there was somebody there who would accommodate himself to his mood, whatever it might be; somebody to listen and understand if he wanted to talk:—and he

began to feel as if he had already spoken, were already understood. He half closed his eyes. . . .

Was there not something mysterious about all this? Father O'Brien had only caught sight of him for a moment, as they had met in the sudden glare of a passing tram:—how could he have guessed that there was anything weighing on his mind? They hardly knew each other. How could they? There had been no opportunity. And yet he felt at present as if the priest had known him for years and years; and the very room seemed as familiar to him as his bedroom at home.

He looked at the pictures. They were still cold and austere; but they were at the same time less forbidding than they had been. He had a sort of instinct now that they were things one might come to love. He had thought them ugly, but really they were beautiful:—sad, and full of a kind of proud tenderness. "Why did you speak to me? Why did you bring me here?" he suddenly asked.

The words had slipped out involuntarily (he had not intended to speak at all, still less to think aloud like this), yet, now they were spoken, he was glad.

Father O'Brien smiled. The question—strange as it must have sounded—did not appear to awaken him from any alien train of thought. He was ready for it, and answered it at once, answered even without looking up. "I suppose it was a kind of divination. . . . You gave me the impression of being very much alone:—I

mean, absolutely alone:—the way one is, now and then, when one wakens up at night in the dark. . . . You seemed also to be uncertain—as if you were waiting for something—something that might help you to make up your mind:—and I thought you might as well wait in here as out in the street.”

“All the same, I was going home,” said Miles.

Father O’Brien smiled again. “Yes, you told me so; but I think you would have turned back.”

There was a pause; then the boy said, just a shade doubtfully, “No one—nobody has been talking to you?”

“About you? No.”

Miles’s head sank forward on his breast; his clasped hands somehow gave him a strangely pathetic air.

“And then, I hadn’t seen you for a long time,” Father O’Brien continued. “I wondered how you had been getting along. . . . That is all.”

“I don’t go to the Traills’ now,” Miles said quietly. “At least, I hadn’t been there for months until to-night.”

A wonderfully kind expression came into the priest’s face. “That is a pity,” he answered simply, “because I’m sure they liked to have you. . . . I think it is always a pity to drop old friends. It is like rooting up old flowers in a garden. The old flowers are the sweetest—and then, one can depend upon them.”

Miles said nothing. The priest looked at him for a moment or two, and then looked away.

He knew the boy would speak sooner or later ; and he let him take his own time.

"I only went this evening," Miles said, "because I had quarrelled in the afternoon with Beach. I hit him on the head with a stick, and hurt him pretty badly :—I went this evening to say I was sorry."

"You were fighting? Of course I saw you had been fighting as soon as you came into the room."

"He gave me a licking. It was then I hit him with a stick and cut his head."

Father O'Brien saw his eyes fixed on Piero's stern, proud Madonna—on that wonderful Child lying upon her knees, with his sad, wise, drooping mouth. The priest spoke, but his words had no apparent bearing upon what Miles had just told him. "I do not want to intrude into matters which do not concern me," he said slowly, almost diffidently ;—"though indeed, in a way, this does concern me ; that is, if my caring about it can produce such an effect. But I do not want you to think me officious or impertinent, therefore I hardly like to tell you that I cannot help feeling there is something about which you are unhappy. To be quite straightforward, that was really the reason why, when we passed each other in the street to-night, I turned and came after you. It may have been simply a fancy, an impression created by some trick of the light and shadow ; but, whatever it was, it struck me very forcibly. And then I wondered how you had been getting on. Sometimes, you know, one comes to a sort

of *impasse*. One misses the way, or rather there seems to be no way at all."

"Isn't there enough in what I have just told you? He is in bed with his head bandaged up. His mother called in a doctor."

"I gathered that the blow was more or less accidental."

"My hitting him on the head was an accident; but I tried to hit him on the arm; I wanted to hurt him:—to hurt him badly."

"Then that is everything? . . . You must forgive me, Miles. It is all, I know, very private; and my sole excuse for questioning you is that I can remember my own boyhood. I know its troubles were not what most people would have taken them to be—troubles lightly coming, lightly going. I know, in fact, that they were all the greater simply because I was not then able to see beyond them. When we begin to grow old, we realise that nothing is permanent—neither joy nor sorrow; but it takes years to find that out."

Miles sat staring into the fire.

"There are some things you don't outlive," he said at last, in a low voice. "I mean, you don't outlive being naturally a rather rotten kind of person."

"Yes, that too. Life is peculiar. Some people come into the world more heavily handicapped than others; but, if they win through, the very difficulties they have surmounted give them an inestimable advantage. Only, nobody wins anything by giving way to discouragement. Discouragement makes life impossible."

Miles moved in his chair uneasily. "Sometimes things get into a sort of hopeless mess, and everything you try to do only makes it worse."

"It doesn't really, for what matters, again, is not 'things,' but you yourself, your own character."

"I wish I could get away from it all."

Having muttered this, he relapsed into silence—a silence which the priest did not disturb. But presently Miles broke out himself. "It is like this. I don't get on well with my uncle. You know him. . . . He hates me:—at any rate, he thinks I'm no good. There has been a row at school, and I am more or less mixed up in it. I don't really know how much; or what is going to happen. There was a boy called Cantillon I used to go with, and he has been expelled. He told things about me. They were true, and at the same time not true. I can't explain it properly:—only I wasn't like Cantillon. I did rotten enough things, but I never did anything really bad—I mean, I never did any harm to anyone else—and I always hated Cantillon."

"Why did you go with him?"

"I went with him because there was no one else; and, partly, because Beach didn't like him. It was after I stopped going with Beach."

"Why did you stop?"

"I didn't like young Hayes. I don't suppose anybody could understand that either, unless they had felt in the same way; and I can't make it clear. But that's what began it. That's why

I say you can't outlive being naturally a rotten sort of chap. I daresay nobody else would have behaved in such a way."

"I think perhaps I do understand. As I see it, it is something like this:—you can stop me if I am wrong. To begin with, you were friends with Beach——"

"He's the only friend I ever had," Miles interrupted, "but it was all on one side."

"Perhaps not all. I don't deny that very probably it meant more to you than it did to him,—perhaps a great deal more. What I do deny is, that jealousy is in any degree a true measure of affection. You resented Beach's friendship with Hayes because you thought it was closer than his friendship with you. You made up your mind to drop out altogether rather than take a second place; and because you were unhappy, and because you wanted to make Beach think you were indifferent to him, and also, perhaps, a little to annoy him, you took up with this other boy, whom you knew he disliked. It is all natural, very natural:—only it is not good enough. It is selfish, common. In life, no doubt, as in everything else, it is very hard to be fine, to be rare; but if one does not make an effort, has no ideals, then one simply lapses into vulgarity, ceases to count." The priest had risen to his feet, and his whole attitude had become more admonitory, though it still retained all its kindness. "Now I have the impression that that is not in the least the end to which you were born. On the contrary, I believe you were born to be a fine fellow, and I am quite

sure you will become one if you care enough. It can all be summed up in that:—if you care enough.”

He stood, his elbow on the mantel-piece, looking down at Miles, who still sat gazing into the fire. Then Miles too got up.

“I have kept you perhaps rather late,” said Father O’Brien, glancing at his watch. “I will walk home with you, and explain how it happened;—a little fresh air will do me good. There are lots of other things I should like to talk to you about. You must come to see me again, and we won’t leave it this time to chance.” With his hand on the boy’s shoulder he piloted him out of the room. He knew Mr Oulton fairly well, he thought; at any rate, well enough for his purpose; and he very much wanted, with Miles safe in bed, to say a word or two to him.

## XLV

ON the next morning, Evan waited in vain for Beach to call for him. At last he set off for school alone, wondering what had happened. But he was not to be left long in doubt. Running out into the quadrangle at the end of second period, he saw Palmer Dorset bearing down upon him, and some instinct, or premonition, caused him to retreat hurriedly by the way he had come.

Inside the class-room, at the upper end of it, two of the junior masters were talking together. Evan hovered discreetly near the door. Suddenly, as he turned his back to it for a moment, a hand grasped the collar of his jacket, and he was hauled down the steps. "What are you skulking about in there for?" Palmer hissed in his ear. "Anyone would think you were a kid, and I was the bully in a school-story. You needn't pretend you didn't see me, because I know you did."

"I wasn't skulking," answered Evan, feebly. "Take your hand away, please; you're crumpling my collar."

"You *were* skulking," said Palmer, giving him a preliminary shake. "You saw me coming, and deliberately ran in there to avoid me, like a beastly rabbit scooting into its hole. You very nearly succeeded too:—I thought Johnson had called you back for something."

"Why did you follow me, then?" asked Evan, picking up his cap, which had been knocked off in the tussle.

"I wanted to make sure. I always make sure, young Hayes—especially when I'm dealing with chaps like you. Come round here; I want to talk to you."

Evan brushed the dust off his cap, and felt his collar to see if it was all right. He looked decidedly cross. "What do you want to talk about? We can talk where we are, can't we?"

"No. As soon as my back's turned you'll be trying to do a bunk."

"You won't be turning your back."

"Come on: no cheek."

Evan frowned. He pushed back his ruffled hair from his forehead, and his lips pouted. "I'm not coming. I'm not going to be late and get lines just to suit your convenience."

"It's time you had a few lines to do. You're a bit of a scab, young Hayes. You need some big, strong, kind-hearted chap like me to keep you respectable." As he spoke, Palmer's grasp closed upon the younger boy's arm, and he led him, more forcibly than affectionately, round to the back of the mathematical schools. "Are you going up to Beach's this afternoon?"

"No."

"Did you hear that he had hurt his head:—got a fall or something?"

"No."

"Well, you needn't look so infernally sulky. It doesn't improve you. You're supposed to be

a rather good-looking kid. I can't see it myself, but I've heard other people mention it. Why aren't you going to Beach's?"

"Because I'm not." He made an ineffectual attempt to get away.

"None of that," said Palmer, grabbing him by the shoulder, and pushing him back against the wall. "We must have this out together."

"But it's Limpet next period, and he'll kick up a row."

"He will: the devil of a row. And you'll have the pleasure of sharing it with me. That's never happened to you before, and you should look upon it as an honour."

"I don't want it to happen," said Evan.

Palmer regarded him imperturbably. "You're wasting time. . . . So you're not going up to see Beach, though I tell you he's met with an accident! You've stopped coming to the Workers' Club, too:—why is that?"

"I had to."

"You mean, your people made you?"

Evan glanced despairingly round for aid, but the field was deserted, even the last stragglers had gone into school. "Yes," he said sullenly.

"But why aren't you going up this afternoon?"

Evan's wrath overcame his natural timidity. "What business is it of yours?" he burst out, his scowling face the colour of a scarlet geranium.

"Are you going to-morrow?"

"No. . . . I say, we'll get caned if we go in twenty minutes late."

"I hope so. It's a jolly lump better than

getting lines, though it may be a little painful at the time."

Poor Evan made a movement forward, only to encounter the solid form of his tormentor firmly planted in his path. He realised his helplessness, and, as he did so, his expression began to change from one of anger to one of grief, but Palmer watched the alteration with a perfectly callous eye. "You wouldn't like to be caned, I expect: you'd rather do lines for a week. However, if we're too late, we won't go in at all."

Evan gulped down the rage in his heart.

"Why can't we talk at recess?" he asked.

"I don't know:—I feel like talking now; that is all. You haven't answered my question yet; and for goodness sake don't look as if you were going to begin to blub."

"What question?"

"About Beach."

"What business is it of yours?"

"No cheek, now."

Evan sulked in silence.

"Why aren't you going up this afternoon?"

"I'm not going because I'm not allowed to go, damn you," he suddenly shouted.

"Ss-hh: no swearing. Nice little boys like you mustn't use bad language. I know you're not allowed to go, but I want to know *why* you aren't allowed?"

"Well, you can keep on wanting."

"It isn't your own wish to drop going, is it?"

"It's none of your business."

"It's your pater, I suppose. Tell me at once or I'll begin to bully you."

Evan drew back with a little cry. "Yes," he said.

"Somebody must have been speaking to him, then:—probably Oulton. He's in Oulton's office, isn't he? and Oulton has a down on Beach. Now look here, young Hayes, you know very well this whole thing is nothing but a lot of bally rot, and that you oughtn't to take it lying down. I'm going to give you a piece of good advice. If you don't assert yourself now, you never will. Instead, you'll grow into a beastly little funk. You're not much of a man as it is, but if you tried you might possibly improve, and if you don't try you'll be an even more hopeless worm than I thought you. Remember it's for your own sake I'm talking to you. I've no idea if it matters to Beach whether you drop him or not:—it oughtn't to:—in any case, he can do a jolly lot better without you than you can without him. . . . I suppose now—I'm just asking this out of curiosity—I suppose you haven't by any chance been forbidden to go with me?"

"If you want to know, I have," said Evan, viciously.

The red-haired boy stuck his hands deep in his trouser pockets. He surveyed his victim with mingled disgust and contempt. "Good Lord!" he ejaculated. "Your father must be a jolly interesting man to meet! I wish you'd introduce me."

Evan began to whimper. "Don't be a beastly cad, Dorset. You *are* a beastly cad."

"It's you that's beastly, you little rotter," said Palmer, ominously. "I may as well tell you that it's taking all the self-restraint I possess to keep me from hammering the life out of you at this moment. It's jolly lucky for you I happen to have such a lot. . . You were told to drop *me*, Palmer Dorset! And you've actually got the infernal impudence to repeat such a thing to my face! You don't seem to understand the enormity of it, you hopeless little blighter!"

Goaded at last beyond endurance, Evan plucked up a spark of spirit. "I don't know what you mean. You seem to imagine you *are* somebody!"

"I do; and you blooming well imagine it too. You blooming well know that you've never seen anybody like me in your life before, and never will again."

"I'm sure I hope not."

"What? Defiance? Open defiance? No: this is too much: this demands instant punishment."

He drew back his fist and thrust his face very close to that of the unfortunate defier. Evan would have retreated had not his back already been in contact with the brick wall. His brief opposition flickered out like a candle in a sudden draught. "I thought you said you weren't a bully," he faltered, his lip beginning to quiver.

"I never said anything of the sort," answered Palmer. "And it doesn't take a bully to put the fear of God into you, my boy. Don't you wish you were safe at home at this moment, sitting

before the fire, discussing Beach and Palmer Dorset with papa? But you're not. You're very far from it." There was a sinister light in Palmer's small eyes that terrified the wretched Evan. Two tears trembled on his eyelashes, and rolled down his smooth brown cheeks.

Palmer released him. "That's enough," he remarked, with a sudden change of manner, patting him on the shoulder. "But you know, you *will* be a damned young skunk if you let things slide, and do nothing. I'm not making fun now: I'm talking seriously. Beach has been very decent to you. Even if everything Oulton said about him was true, you ought to stick up for him. People don't turn round on their pals like that. He's always stuck up for you when I've said things against you, and I've said plenty."

He paused, but Evan made no reply, simply stood there, his back against the wall. Palmer waited, but the silence was unbroken, and the red-haired boy's expression became a trifle grim.

"About myself:—you can follow papa's advice with a free conscience:—it's quite a different matter. You never were a pal of mine, and I strongly suspect you never will be. Now, trot along, like a good little boy, and think it all over. If I were you I'd give Limpet a miss this morning. You'll find it difficult to explain satisfactorily that you were so interested in a conversation with me that you forgot all about his class. Limpet is obtuse; he wouldn't understand; and might even take it for cheek."

Evan looked up at last.

"I'll tell him the truth," he said hysterically. "I'll tell him that you kept me on purpose—that you wouldn't let me go."

"Will you?"

Palmer took a step forward, and Evan flung his arms up to protect his face. "If you hit me, I'll tell him you did," he screamed. "Damn you, you big red-headed sneak." He began to snivel, brushing the back of his hand across his eyes.

"Stop," said Palmer, pulling down his hands and looking at him sternly. "Don't make a row before you're hurt."

"You're as b-bad as Cantillon," said Evan. "And it was you got him sacked."

"Run along now before I whip you. You're a disgrace to the whole Hayes family. You ought to be in a kindergarten, if it wasn't for the language you've picked up. Why don't you put up your fists like a man if you're in such a foaming wax? I'll take you on with my left hand."

"You wouldn't take on anyone your own size. You're a dirty cad: that's what you are: and I'll never speak to you again. You've got me into this row on purpose. I'll tell Beach what you did, and he'll lick you for it."

Evan moved away, keeping close to the wall till he had reached the corner; but Palmer had no intention of following. He stood looking after him with a sort of wrathful amusement.

## XLVI

BEACH all afternoon loitered about between the house and the garden, waiting for Palmer. After what he had been told, he did not expect Evan, but as the time passed it began to look as if Palmer too were going to fail him. He did not know what to think. *Something* must have happened, or Palmer would have come. He wandered about forlornly and aimlessly, and presently went indoors and had tea with his mother.

After tea he came out again, but still there was no sign of his chum. Beach disliked being by himself. In the morning he had knocked about with the gamekeeper, but he had nothing to do now, and, though Palmer would probably turn up during the evening, he had still a couple of hours to put in before dinner. He was on the point of going back to the house when he heard the sound of a motor, and next moment saw Mr Oulton's car coming up the drive.

The wrongs he had suffered were still very fresh in Beach's mind. After all the mischief his enemy had made, it seemed to him an extraordinary piece of effrontery that he should actually come to call on his mother, exactly as if nothing had happened. It was really too much! And with a burning desire to tell Mr Oulton what he

thought of him, he stepped off the grass, and intercepted the car. He planted himself directly in the way. The chauffeur jammed down the brake just in time to prevent an accident, for he had regarded the "holding up" as a joke, and had expected the boy to jump aside. He swore violently, but Mr Oulton said nothing.

Beach was already at the door of the car, which he opened unceremoniously. "I want to speak to you for a moment. I won't keep you long."

Mr Oulton got out, motioning to the chauffeur to drive on. It was not till the man was out of earshot that he turned to Beach. "And now, what is the meaning of this?" he asked sternly. "You were very nearly run over!"

Beach stood before him, as if to bar his progress, an expression of dogged determination upon his face. "I want you to tell me if you made any remarks about me to Mr Hayes?"

Mr Oulton lost patience. "This is sheer impertinence," he exclaimed, attempting to walk on.

But Beach caught him by the arm. "You can hardly refuse to answer," he said passionately. "I suppose you are a gentleman."

Mr Oulton stood still. "Yes, I did say something about you to Hayes: I might easily have said more."

"You said I wasn't a fit companion for Evan. You needn't deny it."

"I haven't the slightest intention of denying it," replied Mr Oulton, dryly.

His calmness infuriated Beach, who had expected him at any rate to show a certain amount of discomfiture. "And either you or Mrs Oulton told Dr Melling my influence at school was a bad one. Evan has been forbidden to come here. I should have thought, under the circumstances, you might have had the decency to stay away yourself. It was the least you could do."

Mr Oulton's eyes had a distinctly dangerous light in them now. "If I were you, my boy, I should try to control my temper. I don't suppose you realise your own insolence, but some day you may go too far."

"And then?" asked Beach, scornfully.

"Then you may regret it."

He made a second attempt to move on, but Beach again prevented him. "Are you threatening me?" he asked softly.

Mr Oulton flashed round. "You impudent puppy! What you need is a thrashing to teach you manners, and if you were my son you would get it."

"I daresay; or even your nephew."

Mr Oulton grasped him by the collar of his jacket and swung him round, almost lifting him from his feet. He would have proceeded there and then to administer the thrashing had not the white linen hat Beach was wearing fallen off, revealing his bandaged head. Mr Oulton stayed the hand he had already raised, but he still gripped the boy by his collar, and in this position they were discovered by Mrs Traill.

Mrs Traill had come out to get some flowers from the greenhouse, and the chauffeur had told her of her visitor's arrival. She stared in astonishment, as if hardly believing her eyes. "Mr Oulton, *what* are you doing?" she cried. "Beach, what is the meaning of all this?"

Mr Oulton released the boy, but his grim, resolute face did not relax as he raised his hat. "I was going to give him what he deserves," he said harshly, "and what he has deserved for a very long time."

Mrs Traill looked him in the eyes. "Surely you weren't going to strike him! Don't you see he has been hurt?"

"I didn't notice it till his hat fell off, and he gave me a good deal of provocation."

"What has happened; Beach? What have you been doing? Tell me at once."

Beach assumed as careless an attitude as he could. "It's rather an old thing," he murmured, with affected indifference. "I told you at the time."

"Told me what?"

"About our going to his house to get my photograph back."

"But——" Mrs Traill hesitated. She looked at her son searchingly. Mr Oulton stood watching them, a faint smile on his thin lips.

Mrs Traill saw the smile. "Why are you bringing it all up again now?" she suddenly asked him.

"I didn't bring it up," he replied, "nor was it the point at issue, I'm afraid. Your son, in a

very rough fashion, took it upon himself to forbid me the house, and I lost my temper. No doubt it appears rather ridiculous, but as a matter of fact this sort of thing has gone on too long. 'He is not a child.'

If he admitted having lost his temper, his face, and his manner, showed plainly enough that he had not yet recovered it, and Mrs Traill took this in as she advanced a couple of paces—a movement which brought her side by side with Beach: "I'm sorry if he has been rude," she said quietly, "but surely there was no need for violence. After all, he is only a schoolboy."

"That is so; but when a schoolboy goes out of his way to be as insolent as possible—I mean, when he consistently keeps up that attitude—I'm afraid in the end it is bound to wear out one's patience. . . . If you think I was to blame, of course I have nothing more to say."

Mrs Traill turned to Beach, upon whom Mr Oulton's frigid politeness had had anything but a pacifying effect. "Surely, Beach——"

"I apologised to him for the other business at the time, and I sent the money to pay for the broken window."

"Both were done *after* I had found out the truth."

"Yes, that's just the rotten sort of thing you'd think," the boy broke out fiercely, while his mother laid a restraining hand on his arm. "I don't care. He knows very well I hadn't time to do anything before he rang up."

Mr Oulton shrugged his shoulders. He

addressed himself deliberately to Mrs Traill. "I don't think we need go into that matter all over again. It had nothing whatever to do with what took place this afternoon."

"We need go into it," cried Beach. "You don't believe me. . . . And it *has* something to do with what took place this afternoon. . . . He's been saying things about me to Mr Hayes—advising him not to let Evan come up here."

Mrs Traill looked at her visitor rather curiously. "Is that why we've seen so little of Miles lately?" she asked.

"I didn't know you hadn't seen him. I wish you would allow me to explain. The whole thing——"

But she interrupted him, still pressing the point of Miles's absence. "You don't really believe Beach could do him or Evan any harm, do you?"

Mr Oulton was driven into a corner. "Beach was not alone in the matter," he replied stiffly. "There is young Dorset too, and it is he who is the leader. This housebreaking affair, since you will insist on it——"

"But surely you don't look upon it as *real*?" exclaimed Mrs Traill. "It was very wrong, of course, but surely it was only mischief."

"On Beach's part, I daresay. . . . I am not thinking so much of the thing itself," he went on coldly, "as of the way in which it was carried out. There was something unpleasant about that—something which strikes deeper than a mere spirit of mischief. . . . And I did not like

the letter I received from young Dorset afterwards. . . . I do not wish to set you against him, but there is an incalculable element in that boy which makes him a dangerous companion for others of his age. You know how imitative boys are, and how much they admire physical courage and recklessness. I'm sorry that in an unguarded moment—and I must again insist under great provocation—I dropped a hint to Hayes—a hint I never expected him to take up as he apparently *has* taken it up. I shall put that right at the first opportunity, and also look into another matter of which I had not even heard until Beach accused me of it just now. He says that either my sister-in-law or I have been trying to influence Dr Melling against him. Such a thing is hardly possible, but I shall ask her as soon as I get home. . . . I can say no more than that.”

He did, as a matter of fact, say more, but it was not really very long before he took his departure. Beach watched him go, raising his hat in response to Mr Oulton's parting salute. He no longer felt angry. At this moment, indeed, he had a sense of positive joy. For he knew, or thought he knew, that the danger he had once feared was past:—that is to say, he somehow felt morally certain that his mother now would never marry Mr Oulton.

## XLVII

MRS TRAILL laid her hand upon his arm. She, too, stood watching the departing motor. But whatever she might have been going to say was not said, for at that instant Palmer appeared upon the scene. With Mr Oulton's warning still fresh in her memory, she gazed at the approaching boy, who took off his cap and smiled. She found the dimples which this smile revealed distinctly comforting. Palmer might be as great a rascal as Mr Oulton had hinted—she of course did not really think he was—but he certainly, to an unprejudiced eye—even the most alert and suspicious eye—did not *look* dangerous.

Nevertheless, she still kept her hand on Beach's arm, as if protectively, and the red-haired boy must have noticed something unusual in the gaze she bent upon him, and also in Beach's attitude, which was slightly sheepish. "How do you do?" he remarked cheerfully. "What's up?"

"There's nothing up," answered Beach. "Leave your bike where it is; it will be all right."

Mrs Traill laughed. "We look rather as if we were going to have our photograph taken, don't we, Palmer?"

"Yes. Beach's expression is very nearly perfect."

Beach was about to reply, when his mother

murmured under her breath, "Don't say anything about Mr Oulton." And she moved slowly across the grass, leaving the two boys alone together.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit late," Palmer apologised. "I would have been here sooner, only I was busy. I went with the pater to see Limpet. We arranged it last night after I got home."

"Arranged what? What's happened now? Shall we stay out here or go inside?"

"Oh, we're all right here." Palmer sat down on a bench as he spoke, and Beach sat down beside him. "How are you? Head still bad?"

"No, I don't feel it unless something presses on it. That's why I'm wearing this hat. What did you go to Limpet for?"

"About Oulton:—what he told us last night about getting sacked. I talked it all over with the pater when I got home. I thought he might be able to do something."

"I don't see what he *can* do," said Beach. "He doesn't even know Miles, does he?"

"He can do more than you think. He has a good deal of influence with Limpet. He's one of the governors of the school. But quite apart from that, Limpet has a great respect for him. He sees his name, you know, in reviews, and that sort of thing. And once he got an article of Limpet's—some sort of educational muck—stuck in somewhere, and Limpet was frightfully bucked. . . . So, unless they messed it up between them after I left, I imagine things will work out fairly well."

Beach did not quite understand. He did not see how Limpet's respect for Dorset's father, could affect the case either one way or the other.

"You mean you got your father to speak to him about Miles?"

"Yes; and I spoke myself."

"What frightful cheek!"

"It wasn't cheek at all. Nobody thought it cheek. You must remember I've been in this affair from the beginning."

"It doesn't matter, anyway, so long as you think Miles won't be sacked."

"Well, he won't. I'm quite sure of that. One doesn't like to praise oneself, of course, but really I managed this show jolly well."

Beach looked at him with a half-incredulous amazement. "How did you manage it?" he asked.

"I managed it by telling the truth. There was no beating about the bush; I had to be perfectly explicit. In fact, once or twice, I had to give myself away a bit."

"I'm sure."

"You needn't be sarcastic. It's perfectly true. You see, I went over the whole ground. I mean, I went into what *does* do harm at school, and what doesn't:—and a lot of other things as well. If I had been alone, of course, Limpet would have stopped me up pretty soon, but the pater took my side, and he had at any rate to listen. I don't know exactly what they both think of me at present:—but that can't be helped. And I know what they think of Miles."

"What do they think of him?" asked Beach, who was still a little sceptical.

"They think what I told them to," Palmer replied.

He was obviously bursting with self-satisfaction, but Beach could pardon this. "It was jolly decent of you," he said warmly. "I didn't know you cared so much for Oulton."

Palmer looked displeased. "I don't," he answered shortly. "You needn't get it into your head that there was anything of the noble schoolboy friend touch about this. There wasn't."

Beach smiled.

"You needn't laugh: there's nothing to laugh at."

"I'm not laughing. It's only that you seem to hate being thought decent."

"I don't," said Palmer, impatiently. "I like Oulton all right, in his own way, and he belongs, or used to belong, to our little lot:—but that's all. . . . There's one thing, however:—I'll not be able to go to Limpet with many more yarns. He's beginning to smell a rat, I'm afraid; and he might end by wanting to sack *me*."

"Of course, he'd be quite within his rights if he did," said Beach, dispassionately. "If I were a schoolmaster I'd sack you myself."

"Thanks."

"Well, you know what I mean."

"I don't, but it doesn't matter." He suddenly stared at Beach, as if a new thought had just struck him. "By the way, I hope to goodness you were behaving yourself this afternoon?"

Beach did his best to stare back again. "What makes you think I wasn't?"

"Oulton's face:—and yours now. I wish you'd try to be civil to him for a bit, even if he is a beast."

"Civil to who?"

"To Mr Oulton."

"Why?"

"Because, after last night, the least you can do is to make it up with Miles, and if you keep on annoying the old buck there will be all sorts of unnecessary difficulties."

"I don't see it. Miles isn't so keen on him as you imagine."

"I don't imagine anything. And if I did, it wouldn't matter. Whether he's keen on him or not, the old man's his uncle, and if you keep on getting in his wool every time you knock across him he won't let Miles come up here."

Beach might have retorted that in the "old man's" opinion it was Palmer himself who was the undesirable. But he didn't. "He's got Mr Hayes not to allow Evan to come up here," he muttered, forgetting his mother's parting injunction. "He admitted it himself—even to mummy."

"Can't you apologise to him?" said Palmer.

Beach nearly jumped out of his seat. "Apologise! What the nation have I to apologise for?"

"I rather wanted to bring this thing off," Palmer went on, discontentedly. "I don't see why you need be so anxious to put the kybosh on it at the last moment."

"I'm not anxious to put the kybosh on it. But if it depends on my apologising——"

"Well, don't get in a wax. It would be a rather decent thing to do—that's all—especially under the peculiar circumstances."

Beach shook his head. He understood more or less what Dorset was after, but the line must be drawp somewhere. "It's impossible," he said. "You may as well accept that once and for all. I believe he'd only think I was up to some game even if I were to try it."

"Oh, rot! It could be done quite well if you hadn't such an infernal sense of your own dignity."

Beach shook his head again. The thing was for him simply out of the question. "It couldn't be done," he replied. "I don't say you couldn't or wouldn't do it; but I can't."

"Not if you make up your mind not to."

"Well, I think we'll change the subject."

But Palmer refused to change it. "You're so beastly obstinate," he muttered angrily. "It's like talking to a lump of wood."

"Well, I can't help it," said Beach.

"You could if you liked."

"I couldn't."

"You could. And by the way, since you've mentioned young Hayes, I may as well inform you that you're not the only one he's been told to drop. He's been told to drop me. What about cheek now?"

"How do you know?" asked Beach.

"I know, because he said so. I very nearly smacked his head for him."

"Well, there's one thing I'm pretty sure of: he wouldn't have said it if you hadn't forced him to."

"I didn't force him to. I simply asked him. He *enjoyed* saying it."

"Well, then, it was your own fault."

"It wasn't my fault. Look here: I suppose you'll get your rag out in a minute: but I should like very much to get this matter of young Hayes off my chest and have done with it. He isn't really good enough——"

"Why——"

"Wait a second, can't you, till I've finished speaking! He's not good enough either for you or for me. You shouldn't make a close friend of a chap—I don't care what he's like in other ways—if he isn't willing to back you up when you're in a tight place, or when there's a chance of a row. Hayes is afraid of a row. He's afraid of pretty nearly everything on God's earth."

"Why can't you leave him alone then?" asked Beach, irritably.

"I'm going to. But you know what that will mean?"

"I don't. You're always saying you'll leave him alone, and you never do it."

"It will probably mean that I'll have to leave you alone too:—that is, if Hayes comes back, and I expect he will."

Beach frowned as he dug his heel into the grass. "What has his coming back to do with it?" he asked impatiently.

"It has a great deal to do with it. It annoys

me to see you taking him seriously. He's not worth it. He's not anything like such a good chap as Oulton, for instance, and you didn't bother very much when *he* dropped out. . . . At least, you did. . . . I know it wasn't your fault, and that you asked him to come back, and all that. Only, the fact remains that nothing has gone decently since Hayes was allowed to stick in his oar. He's nice to look at, but that's all."

"Just because he hasn't got certain qualities you happen to admire:—in fact, just because he hasn't one particular quality!"

"I know you think so, but it isn't that at all. Why, the little beast's actually ashamed of his own people! You're extraordinarily blind. Damn it all, he doesn't like *you*."

Beach flushed hotly, but Palmer went on with an angry, almost a brutal frankness, determined to speak his mind at last, even though it should mean the breaking of their friendship.

"I daresay he likes you in a feeble sort of way, but it's only because it has been more or less forced upon him, and because of what you can do for him. He's a damned little outsider, and always will be. He isn't worth what you give him. If I wanted to, I could make him *my* friend. He as good as told me so. Is *that* plain enough?"

"Quite."

Beach sat silent, not looking at Palmer, who leaned back, with his eyes fixed on the dark trees that were almost indistinguishable now in

the dusk. Through the darkness the windows of the house shone with a warm ruddy light.

Suddenly Palmer sprang to his feet. "Oh, come on," he cried impatiently. "Don't, for God's sake, let's sit here mugging over it. I can't stick this sort of rot."

## XLVIII

ON the next day, which was a Saturday, Beach went out immediately after lunch. He did not go far, merely down to the water's edge, where he stood gazing out beyond the river, over a green expanse of meadow land, that rose in a gradual hill, crowned by a line of trees. A heron, with long skinny legs stretched out behind it, flapped in slow flight over the water. Far away, against a sombre autumn sky, he could see the dark curved line of the Black Mountain.

It was a grey day, warm for the time of year, windless and damp, as if the atmosphere were charged with rain. A moist, mushroomy smell rose from the brown carpet of pine needles upon which he stood; low clouds floated eastward; and the grass and the leaves were wet and drooping as with a heavy dew.

Presently he turned back towards the house. Over the tangled brake of ferns and brambles the yellow fallen leaves of chestnut-trees were scattered. In the hollows they lay heaped in sodden drifts, while the branches of the trees, through their thinned foliage, traced black delicate arabesques against the sky. Then, as he came out into the clearing near the house, he saw Evan, and quickened his pace.

"Hello!"

"Hello!"

Evan's manner was self-conscious; he was not quite at his ease; Beach, too, seemed influenced by what had taken place during the past few days.

"Are you doing anything particular? I thought we might go for a walk or something."

"All right."

They stood, rather at a loss, till Beach said, "Dorset is sure to turn up, but he won't be here before three. I'll just leave word at the house to say where he'll find us."

"You don't want to wait for him?"

"No, he can follow."

In a minute or two he rejoined Evan, and, turning off the main drive, they went straight across the fields, past the gamekeeper's cottage, and past a small saw-mill. They walked almost in silence till at the end of half an hour or so they reached a spot where the ground, strewn with a russet carpet of dead leaves, dropped abruptly to the river. The naked trees rose from the dark grey water on either bank, and the tow-path, with its wet surface of clay, glistened where the light caught it—a pale, wan light that seemed to stream out from some place of desolation. Though it was so early in the afternoon, a thin crescent moon already floated above the sky line. A man with a gun under his arm, and a dog following at his heels, passed them. He touched his cap to Beach.

The two boys stood looking down at the white

lights on the surface of the river. An old, square, red-brick house on the opposite bank was reflected as in a dimmed mirror. The distant rattle of a country cart reached them, and now and again a solitary bird-call—plaintive, lonely—rising above the continuous noise of falling water coming from some hidden weir.

Evan broke off the brittle end of a branch and threw it down, and they watched it drift away on the sluggish current. Still they kept silent, as they stood there side by side. The question Beach wanted to ask he could not ask.

"You're very quiet," Evan said at last.

"So are you."

"I didn't talk because I thought you didn't want to."

"Neither I do, particularly. . . . I'm glad you came up."

"I would have come before, only I couldn't. . . . It's all right now, though."

Beach did not ask what had made it all right; he did not want to know; it was the sort of thing, he felt, that is better left in obscurity.

"I think we ought to turn and go back for Dorset," he murmured at last. "You don't mind?"

"No."

But Evan's tone was more doubtful than the word he had used. "We had a bit of a row at school yesterday:—did he tell you?"

"He said something:—not that you had had a row exactly."

"Perhaps he doesn't consider it one. He did a

rather dirty trick ; but I suppose I'd better not mention it."

Beach made no answer, and there was a silence till Evan remarked, "It was mother, who settled about my coming back here."

Beach's face clouded very slightly, so slightly that his companion did not notice it, and went on :

"I think Mr Oulton must have been talking again to my father. I know there was a great discussion last night, and it ended by their deciding to let me come."

"I'll be going back to school on Monday," said Beach, trying to change the subject.

The tone of constraint in his voice penetrated to Evan's consciousness, and warned him that he had struck a false note. "You don't mind, do you, about what I've just told you?"

"Oh, no," said Beach, hurriedly. "Of course, it's not particularly pleasant to feel you've been talked about in that way."

"I thought I'd better tell you:—that you'd like to know it had all been fixed up."

"Yes. Thanks. . . . I hope it's not going to rain."

Evan glanced up at the sky. "Why should it? I don't see any sign of rain. By the way, Miles Oulton was round at our house on Wednesday night."

"Miles !"

"He came to see papa. He told him that his uncle had been telling lies about you. It was rather a queer sort of thing for him to do, don't you think? Papa didn't like it. He said——"

“Here’s Dorset now,” Beach interrupted quickly. “I’ll race you to him.”

He started to run without waiting for a reply, and Evan was forced to follow.

Palmer, when he saw them running, stood still. Probably he had been told at the house that Evan was with Beach, for he showed no surprise. He did not smile, nor did he look at Evan, who may or may not have been included in his brief “Hello!”

“We’ll go home by the woods,” cried Beach.

Something in his voice caused Palmer to glance at him quickly, but Beach refused to meet his eyes.

“It’s confoundedly muddy in your woods,” answered Palmer. “I’m going to put another reef in my trousers.” He bent down to do so, and Beach followed his example. Evan, who wore knickerbockers, walked slowly on ahead.

Beach fumbled with his shoe lace, and at the same time said rapidly in an undertone, “I went down to see Oulton this morning.”

“The old man?”

“Yes. Father O’Brien was up here last night after you were gone. He was talking to me.”

They rejoined Evan.

In the woods they had to walk in single file, scrambling most of the way through a dense undergrowth, and over fallen trees. It was not till they were once more out in the open that Beach said, “Miles is coming up. I was speaking to him through the telephone and he told me he’d be here about six.”

"Then I think we'll clear out before he comes," Palmer observed.

"Why? I told him you'd be here."

"I think it would be better. We can drop in later in the evening, if you like—about eight or so."

"But Evan is staying, so you may as well."

Evan said nothing, and Palmer spoke for him. "I think we should both go. Oulton would like it better. It's only this once;—after that it will be all right."

"But where will you go to? It's a frightful fog for you to go all the way home and then come back again."

"I needn't do that. Young Hayes can ask me to his house. He knows I want to meet his father." He smiled at Evan, who coloured hotly.

"At least, I don't see how he can refuse to ask me," Palmer went on, as Evan remained silent.

"Of course you can come, Dorset, if you want to."

"Thanks awfully. After such an invitation, it were simply churlish to refuse. On the whole, however, I think I'll go home. Well; allons, enfants de la patrie. We'll see you later, Beach."

But Beach walked with them as far as the gate, and then turned homeward by another path. It had grown suddenly cold. A mist had crept up from the river, stealing between the trees, enveloping them, till they seemed to float in it as in some vague milky sea. Beach could

barely make out the dim form of the house on the hill top, for it, too, was half lost in that same filmy vapour, through which the noise of the stream came with a weird and ghostly sound. As he paused, and stood still, the mist thickened. It ceased to be a diaphanous floating veil; it became tangible and opaque—a pallid, opaline substance, which slowly and silently blotted out one shape after another, leaving him at last as if isolated in an amorphous and unrecognisable world. A faint puff of wind sent a whirl of dead leaves rustling through the air; and they dropped on the ground all about him, with a low patter, like the sound of rain. They dropped on his head, and on his shoulders; and his feet when he moved stirred them. Quite close to him was the house with its light and warmth and comfort, yet he seemed to be in some place infinitely solitary and strange. A bat flitted by his cheek. Another sound, the sound of a footfall, startled him for a moment, till he perceived that it was caused by a strayed sheep. The timid woolly creature almost blundered into him, touching his hand as it passed in search of its fellows.

Yet Beach was conscious of all these things merely as a background for the thoughts that rose in his mind. Something seemed to have awakened within him of late:—a new kind of life. It had awakened only partially, perhaps; but a year ago he would not have stood where he was standing now, thinking the thoughts he was thinking now. He thought of Miles

and of Evan and of Palmer and of himself; of life and of what they were all making of life, and of what they would make of it in the future. He thought of the long talk he had had last night with Father O'Brien, of many talks he had had with Palmer Dorset, of his interview that morning with Mr Oulton. He remembered what Palmer had said about himself, about himself and Evan, and he knew that it was true. Somehow, at this moment, he seemed to *feel* what was true, and to know, deep down under everything, that it was Palmer, not Evan, who was, and who would be in future, his real friend. A curious mood began to steal over him—a mood which he had felt before, but never nearly so strongly. . . . He wanted to pray. . . . He wanted to be good and to do good. . . . He remained for three or four minutes quite still, and with his eyes closed.

But presently the reaction came in a sudden insurgence of life through all his body. He wanted to make a noise; he wanted violent movement. If he had been with Palmer just then, he would have shouted and wrestled and, in a general, rowdy way, made a happy fool of himself. As it was, he could not even run, for fear of running against a tree or a railing, until he had got back again into the open fields from which the sheep had wandered. Then he began to race through the white dense mist and over the wet grass, till his foot caught in a tussock, and he came down, sprawling full length, with most of the breath knocked out of his body. He

got up, his exuberance a little quieted, though he still felt a bubbling spring of happiness leaping up within him. He whistled a gay tune as he picked his way more carefully to the beaten path. Then he went back to the house to wait for Miles.

THE END







